



**FAT MIDWAY
POSTER INSIDE!**

INSIDE

Heavenly Sword
Condemned 2
Acme Arsenal
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Rise of the Argonauts
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Jeanne d'Arc
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Beowulf
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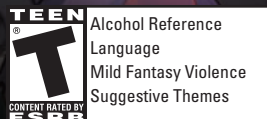
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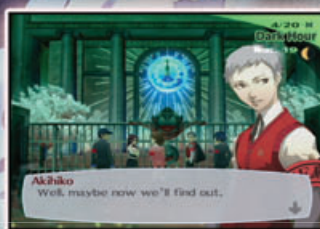


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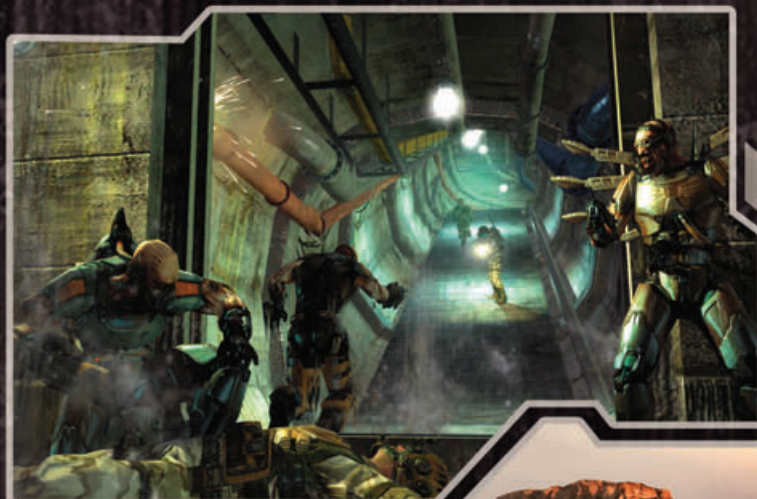


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Mild Blood
Mild Language
Violence

Game Experience May
Change During Online Play

Letter from the Editor

The next, next generation

Looking at where this most recent hardware jump has taken us, it's hard to imagine where we might go next. Having reached the point where characters can be perfectly modeled and motioned-captured to evoke real emotion, 3D gaming has reached a point where anything that can be imagined can be implemented. The latest round of consoles even play our favorite retro games—although I find the memories better than the games 90% of the time—original arcade games designed specifically for pick-up-and-play fun, and online games. Finally gamers can have their cake, eat it and smash it in each other's faces too. Imagining what PS3 games will look like 5 years from now when developers are readily utilizing all of its processing power, or, say, a Gears of War 2 or Fable 3, will we even want more technology? I'd rather see this latest wave of consoles go 10 years over the usual 4-5. It would seem a waste to cash out after 2 generations of software per system. With any luck Microsoft and Sony are thinking the same way. Moving from 8- to 16-bit, 16- to 32-, 32- to 64-, and even 64- to PS2, DC and Cube hardware launches used to be more celebratory, due to the needed leaps in technology. This last one was rocky though, even though it represented the last leg of a long journey. Now that we've arrived here, I can't imagine doing it all again in 3-4 years. And so begs the question...what's next? I say, instead of eking out a slight leap in technology (they'd have to pull my 360 and PS3 from my cold dead hands), I say it's

time to focus our attention on...holograms. Case in point: the upcoming Eye of Judgment. Imagine those graphics without the EyeToy. Hi-poly beasts sitting on a holographic playfield on a black surface before your very eyes. Any level of holographic gaming would be an incredible way to pass the time between console epics, don't you think? Even if the first hardware limited us to set, non-scrolling backgrounds per level, imagine, say, a town on a table; opening doors to interact in shops, etc; or a motocross track full of little MX bikes... Maybe I'm nuts and such a thing is scientifically unfeasible in the near future; but maybe not. That's not the point. This editorial is for entertainment purposes only... I want to know what you think. What should be next?

Dave Halverson Editor In Chief



Art by: LeSean Thomas

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Proceed with caution



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LETTER OF THE MONTH

The Model Mom

Let me just say I am a Mom who games, fairly seriously actually. I have been supporting healthy gaming for my kids for the past 17 years and took up the sport with dedication about 8 years ago (barring all-night Tetris, etc). It all started because Yoshi was just cute... then the call of Final Fantasy soundtracks lured me deep into the woods of RPG where I remain hopelessly lost. We are a small but elite group, us Mom gamers, and know the difference between "...but I'm not near a save point" and "...I'm **really** not near a save point." Now that the kids are grown and out of college, yes, I'm *that* old, I can look back on all those gaming decisions that our family made together and be proud of what we accomplished as a family. The adage that a family that plays together stays together is quite viable. Late nights gaming did not hurt their grades, nor did it lead them to a life of sex and drugs, crimes and violence. There is nothing wrong with blowing up the world and particularly the bad guys in video games...it's nothing that Chaucer, Shakespeare or Hugo hasn't written.

So all you Moms out there, let your kids play the games with all that classic literature content. Blow up the world every once in a while, after all it doesn't really hurt Clank when Ratchet blows him up accidentally and there is a lot to be said for all that strategic discipline required to playing a game through. And the next time your 20-something kids just have to be at the store for a midnight release of Final Fantasy, be there, be cool and get yourself a limited edition too, you just might be the one to walk it with the only *Fight for Dalmasca* T-shirt left.

Christianna

Fan of Odin

Recently, in your Letter from the Editor column, you spoke of being ecstatic with the reaction you received, regarding Play's coverage of Odin Sphere. It was unclear to me where you got the response. Did it come from readers themselves, by letter & email, or was the reaction sales driven? (In other words, did the reserve #'s on such sites as Amazon show promise for Odin Sphere?) I reserved mine and have been nothing but in awe, ever since it came to my door.. a day earlier than release, in fact. I feel that your coverage piece on Odin Sphere did not fully prepare me for the heavenly nirvana that was to come. Not because the article was below par but simply because this is one of a handful of games I've experienced in my small lifetime (I'm a 24 male) that is

impossible to describe fairly... it **MUST** be experienced. Sorry for the dramatic, but I'm passionate about my games. I hope that all the fan response shows in the sales, because I don't want another BG&E/Stranger's Wrath on our hands.

Robert F.

Color him fed up

Every generation since the 8-bit era, someone has aired the grievance that I'm about to. And it always, unsurprisingly, slips past the consideration of most major game publishers. By now, it's beyond shameful, looking increasingly amateurish as the games themselves become more sophisticated. Here it is in 2007 (not a time warp):

Color instruction manuals, where the holy hell art thou??

It is absolutely mad that even the most massive productions, the Games of the Year and the biggest steps forward are often paired with a cheap, usually bent, black and

"So all you Moms out there, let your kids play the games with all that classic literature content."

white instruction booklet. How outrageous was it that Okami, an inspired, *colorful* event, was granted a dull gray manual probably salvaged from recycled toilet wipes? What's the excuse? Did the Celestial Brush suck the ink out?

I dare you, Ubi Soft, Activision, et al, to print the *magazine ads* for your latest game in the same dreary gray as your manuals' pages. Better yet, grayscale the *box art*, because why should the openly visible parts of your product be given more resources than what the actual buyer sees? As if it's not careless enough that you copy the same seen-it-again art on the cover and paste it to the booklet... There's a "completeness" imbued in a well presented game, but for most publishers, that presentation ends at the register.

I understand the need to cut costs when you're a start-up business localizing your first budget title, but when you're a Top 3 publisher who's shortening development times and rehashing games each year, and you're still guaranteed to move over a million units, it's totally asinine. It's an insult to the gamer that pays \$60 for a game, and in the instances where the title is actually decent, it's an insult to the developers who've worked

hard for the last few years to have their efforts published.

Maybe some people don't find a cheap monochrome manual to be such a shame, but to border on melodrama, I find it pretty important and telling. It's something of a flag for the villainy of large game companies, who just don't give a damn what they're selling you so long as you're buying it. It's also a "care indicator" quite often too, because just as those gray manuals go to print, the *real* colors flash yet again: they ship unfinished games, Capcom disbands Clover, EA withdraws marketing for Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath (derailing the Inhabitants), etc... so it means just a little more than paper and ink.

But finally, let's not forget that past all of this, is the little tyke who just picked up his long-desired birthday present at Toys 'R Us, tearing open the package in the back seat of

his parent's car. Those rides home in the rain seem so long when you've got a new world to visit—and it's up to that complementary travel guide to keep you enthusiastic until you're there.

Too bad you can't make out the blurry-ass pictures. Jeremy C.

Kyle the great

Hi everyone. This is in response partly to the April issue, but mostly to the June issue. First I have to say that I really enjoy reading Play. I subscribe to other magazines and enjoy those as well, but if it came down to picking one, I would pick this one mainly because of the content you have as well as the fact that you have your reviewers review games that they enjoy. I can't tell you how many times I was told a game sucked by someone that doesn't really like that genre. I would play the game and love it, but anyway I'm going off on a tangent. I would like to thank you for that piece in your April issue regarding the games that didn't sell so well. I lost that issue for a while, but just found it and made sure to document every game listed in that section. I already have Sudeki, which I loved, and I plan on picking up most, if not all of the others.



I'm glad you brought up the Wii's third party support in this last issue. I really enjoy Nintendo's new console and it annoys me to see so many third-parties pass it up. A big thing that irks me is that the Wii has internet capability, but both Nintendo, as well as their third parties, have not touched it yet. Red Steel as well as Excite Truck along with many others should have been online. If the game's got multiplayer, it should be online. Now I love racing games as well as fighting games, but my friends don't. That leaves any fighting or racing game I get for the Wii that doesn't have online support strictly a single player affair, and playing against the AI gets boring.

I'm also glad you brought up the fact that the Wii is a powerful system. I understand that it's not a 360 or a PS3, but, if the specs from a while back still hold true, it is 4 times as strong as the Cube and look what the Cube could do. The games could look great. I loved playing Zelda on the thing and using the Wiimote to aim. I can never play another third-person shooter the same again. It felt better than using a mouse. This system has so much potential; it bothers me greatly that third parties are passing it up.

Kyle

Someone didn't play Pikmin!

I'm a little surprised Mr. Halverson didn't mention Nintendo's classic Pikmin at all in the Overlord review. Just the first few moments of playing Overlord gave me flashbacks of leading blue Pikmin through water, red Pikmin through fire traps, and using a set number of Pikmin to open gates or roll logs out of the way. Puzzles required maneuvering the Pikmin into places the player couldn't reach, or combating enemies in a certain way, just like Overlord, and were made more elaborate by Yellow, Purple and White Pikmin with their own abilities. Instead of armor and weapons, Pikmin could be lead to honey to increase their health, speed and attack. Heck, even Pikmin collect dead enemies to create more Pikmin. And yes, Triumph's own tasty ingredient, "sweeping," was used extensively in controlling Pikmin. While Overlord is fun, and I don't dispute the score it was rated, I'd hardly call the game unique. It's clear the fine folks at Triumph spent many a night leading Pikmin through puzzles and battles.

Jhun

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PLAYSTATION 3



Hollywood and Games Summit, 2007

Making magic...

words Heather Campbell

this year saw the second annual Hollywood and Games Summit in Los Angeles. With topics ranging from using screen talent and assets across different media, to developing CG in parallel with movie studios, the summit sought to deepen the collaboration between games and film. Hollywood, it seems, is starting to get nervous. With over a billion dollars now being spent and made by mobile media, and console/PC games making more money than film, Jamil Moledina (Games Developers Conference director) put it simply. The money "makes people pay attention."

This is the beginning of what summit speakers refer to as *transmedia*.

As exciting as the panels were, none compared to the vision and dynamism of opening keynote speaker Clive Barker (director/writer, *Hellraiser* and exec. producer of *Gods and Monsters*). Barker's original game *Jericho* arrives this fall on the 360 and the PS3, and Barker was contagiously enthusiastic about the future

of gaming.

Interviewer Gina McIntyre (Hollywood Reporter) opened by asking Barker about the famous Roger Ebert quote on games as art. Ebert is noted for having said, "I believe the nature of the medium prevents it from moving beyond craftsmanship to the stature of art. To my knowledge, no one in or out of the field has ever been able to cite a game worthy of comparison with the great dramatists, poets, filmmakers, novelists and composers."

Barker replied simply, "That's bulls**t. It's a medium that's barely two decades old."

He continued, "I think Ebert's problem is that you can't have art if there is that amount of malleability in the narrative; Shakespeare could not have written *Romeo and Juliet* as a game, because it could have had a happy ending. But the *artists* have put all those options in. Really stretching the imaginations of our players, and of ourselves. Where every churning emotion and feeling available can be accessed by a player. Offering that to people is art."

Barker's vision of a gaming future



"I think Ebert's problem is that you can't have art if there is that amount of malleability in the narrative; Shakespeare could not have written *Romeo and Juliet* as a game, because it could have had a happy ending..."

Clive Barker

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is about collaboration between player-authored spaces. Entering a virtual space where everyone the player sees is an actual person, Barker's imaginary futuristic MMO would be, "The collective unconscious play. A mental revolution. We've given our imaginations over to people who put plastic toys in with the

hamburgers. F*** 'em. Let's take our imaginations away from the people who want the lowest common denominator."

Barker added, "The gaming world is just beginning. This is the great freedom that we have. We should just get on and play, and not be oppressed by notions of worthy attention."



"Let's take our imaginations away from the people who want the lowest common denominator."



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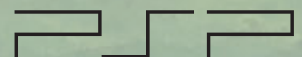


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PlayStation Portable



NPD Group database

august 2007

In light of this issue's RPG cover and Review Opener query we present the top-10-selling RPGs by console. What publishers consider an RPG may strike us, and you, otherwise, but this is how the industry calls it, so don't shoot the messenger.

PLAYSTATION 2	PUBLISHER	SALES
Kingdom Hearts	Square Enix Inc.	3million
Final Fantasy X	Square Enix Inc.	2.44 Million
Kingdom Hearts II	Square Enix Inc.	1.8 Million
Final Fantasy X-2	Square Enix Inc.	1.6 Million
Final Fantasy XII	Square Enix Inc.	1.4 Million
X-Men: Legends	Activision	809,000
Dark Cloud	SCEA	678,000
Star Ocean: Till End	Square Enix Inc.	667,000
Dragon Quest VIII: Journey	Square Enix Inc.	562,000
Marvel: Ultimate Alliance	Activision	513,000

PSP	PUBLISHER	SALES
Untold Legends: Brotherhood	SOE	442,000
X-Men Legends II: ROA	Activision	203,000
Marvel: Ultimate Alliance	Activision	172,000
Monster Hunter Freedom	Capcom	126,000
Valkyrie Profile: Lenneth	Square Enix Inc.	111,000
Untold Legends: The Warriors Code	SOE	107,000
Lord of the Rings Tactics	EA	93,000
Kingdom of Paradise	Square Enix Inc.	80,000
Legend of Heroes: Vermillion	Bandai	69,000
Neo Pets: The Wand of Wishing	SCEA	55,000

XBOX	PUBLISHER	SALES
Fable	Microsoft	1.8 Million
Star Wars KOTOR	LucasArts	1.3 Million
Star Wars KOTOR II	LucasArts	839,000
Morrowind	Bethesda	628,000
Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind	Bethesda	604,000
X-Men Legends	Activision	515,000
Jade Empire	Microsoft	431,000
X-Men Legends II: ROA	Activision	279,000
Lord of the Rings: Third Age	EA	250,000
Marvel Ultimate Alliance	Activision	183,000



Undisputed king of the RPGs: Kingdom Hearts // 3 Million



Final Fantasy X // 2.44 Million



Star Wars KOTOR II // 839,000



Fable // 1.8 Million



Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion // 1.1 Million



Marvel: Ultimate Alliance // 1.2 Million

XBOX 360	PUBLISHER	SALES
Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion	Take 2	1.1 Million
Marvel: Ultimate Alliance	Activision	375,000
Final Fantasy XI Online	Square Enix Inc.	157,000
Enchanted Arms	Ubisoft	132,000
Phantasy Star Universe	Sega	81,000

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Blue Dragon

Something old, something
new, something borrowed,
something Blue.

words Casey Lee



Never mind the dream team of creators at the top—the most impressive part of the Blue Dragon staff roll is the 500-plus names (not counting special thanks) that come next. Money is no substitute for inspiration, of course, but when a game studio gives a blank check to the creator of Final Fantasy and hires half the Japanese game industry to back him up, it's a safe bet that the end result isn't gonna suck.

The heroes of Blue Dragon come from a village that is haunted by weird violet storms that coincide with destructive Land Shark attacks. Young and plucky, the teenage trio (no, really, they could legally drive if they weren't four feet tall) set a trap for their attacker and end up sucked into a world of lost technology. There they find glowing spheres that, when consumed, give

them powerful shadows that can fight and use magic. Blue Dragon's story features a lot of conventional elements, but it has some very cool twists, and its Robots-and-Ruins world design is a welcome departure from the usual D&D-inspired fare.

The varied environments in Blue Dragon range from competent to amazing, but even the duller ones look great when run through the game's impressive effects engine. The game copies the depth-of-field effect of film, focusing in on the area around your heroes and subtly blurring everything in the foreground and background. Other games try to mimic this effect by placing blurry backdrops in the distance, but backgrounds in Blue Dragon that initially look like matte paintings will smoothly transform into highly detailed polygonal objects as you approach them. It's a pretty robust engine, too—there's no pop-in, no frame rate hiccups, no lengthy load times, and no apparent limit to the amount of



Blue Dragon

beautifully detailed characters that can appear together in combat.

Besides its highly distinctive look, one could argue that there isn't much else about Blue Dragon that feels particularly fresh. Its Shadow Class system is basically lifted straight from Final Fantasy V's Job system, but it's hard to complain about that—everyone loved the Job system, and it's a lot of fun here, too. Elements such as the Action Order bar and on-map enemies come straight from Grandia, and many of the game's save-the-town quests are copied verbatim from the Big Book of Hackneyed RPG Scenarios. Blue Dragon's only truly innovative mechanic is the way in which you engage foes outside of combat. You can use Field Skills like Stealth or Stun Bombs to slip behind them, or the cool Field Barrier skill to kill them outright when you don't want to waste time on low-level foes. But the best trick is to hit the right trigger to expand your Encounter Ring, which allows you to engage multiple groups of foes in a single

battle, possibly triggering a Monster Fight in which natural enemies ignore you and attack each other. It's a brilliant system, and Blue Dragon could benefit from a few other innovations of that caliber. But I can't hold the game's traditional nature against it. The games it resembles most (Chrono Trigger, Grandia, Dragon Quest VIII, and Final Fantasy V) are all timeless classics, and creator Hironobu Sakaguchi has every right to cherry-pick the best elements from a genre he helped invent.

Blue Dragon could easily have been an episodic game, since each of its three discs tells a tightly written story with a riveting

"A faithful localization is good news, right? Well... not entirely."

First strikes are important on the field of battle.



"There are absolutely no signs of cut corners or tempered ambitions anywhere in Blue Dragon."



Once Zola is on-board the team is assembled.

forth as often as you like. And I'm happy (surprised? appalled?) to report that Blue Dragon is as obsessed with poop as ever. You'll understand when you play it.

Nobuo Uematsu's exceptional soundtrack hasn't changed a bit either. All of the vocal songs are still in their original languages (some Japanese, some English), which I applaud, but the decision not to change the boss music is going to be somewhat controversial. It's in English (sort of), and enthusiastically performed by former Deep Purple frontman Ian Gillan. Personally, when I hear the song's opening "YAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHH," I can't leap on my TV's mute button fast enough. (You can hear it for yourself by viewing any Blue Dragon boss fight on YouTube.)

A faithful localization is good news, right? Well... not entirely. Microsoft spent nine months on the localization but seem to have done nothing to fix its most glaring flaw. To put it simply, Blue Dragon is really, really easy. The difficulty seems to be balanced on the assumption that players will play the game actively avoiding enemies and passing up all optional side quests and detours, which I'm sure is true of maybe 2% of all RPG players and 0% of Play readers. But if you're the type who searches out every treasure chest, pursues every side quest, and is capable of figuring out obvious combos like combining a skill the regenerates MP with a skill that uses

climax at the end. The first two discs are story-driven and basically linear (although there are a few optional diversions in Disc 2), while the third opens up wide, allowing players to zip straight to the imaginative final area or pursue an array of optional side quests. The total quest is somewhere in the neighborhood of 40 to 50 hours, and while it has a few slow parts, it never feels padded by tedious dungeons or needless combat. Indeed, the game feels unusually packed with content. Every area is distinct, and while several of the 300 enemies use recycled models, there are more distinct foes than in any RPG in recent memory. There are absolutely no signs of cut corners or tempered ambitions anywhere in Blue Dragon—Microsoft wanted a platform-defining RPG epic, and they were willing to pay exactly what it cost to get it.

Our rave review shouldn't be news to avid Play readers—we've not been shy about expressing our love for the Japanese import. Somewhat surprisingly, the North American version of Blue Dragon is virtually identical to its eastern counterpart. The translation is competent, and the voices are pretty good—clearly the actors were instructed to study their Japanese counterparts and mimic them as closely as possible. Some have done a great job with tough material, like the spastic Marumaro, while others have botched easier roles—Zola sounds more bored than steely. But the Japanese voices are still on the disc if you want 'em, and you can switch back and



MP, then you will steamroll through Blue Dragon with ease.

The reason the lack of difficulty is so frustrating is that the game has all the depth necessary to support a higher difficulty curve. The Shadow Class system allows you to build incredible combos that can make your characters nearly unkillable or allow you to trigger a half-dozen effects with a single attack. But there's no reason to ever use them, outside of a small handful of optional super bosses. When you attempt those bosses, you'll get a fleeting taste of how great Blue Dragon could have been, and if you're a hardcore RPG fan who appreciates a strategic challenge, it will break your heart. Fortunately, harder difficulty modes were eventually released as a free download in Japan, and a new dungeon for high-level players was released for 300 Points, finally providing a worthy challenge for hardcore players. There were reports that the harder modes might be initially selectable in the US version, but that hasn't happened. However, the harder difficulty mode download will be made available some time after the game's release. If you like a bit of challenge in your RPGs, you may want to wait for it.

Blue Dragon may have blown the chance to be a strategic masterpiece along the lines of Final Fantasy V, but it hasn't missed many other opportunities to impress. But while Blue Dragon's gorgeous graphics and

As close as you're bound to come to playing a CG movie.

engaging quest have defined the Xbox 360 platform in Japan, it's been left to drown in a flood of high-profile autumn releases here in North America. I can't imagine Blue Dragon will fare well against such heavyweights as BioShock, Mass Effect, and Halo 3, but if you're a true Japanese RPG fan, you're gonna have to suck it up and find a way to trade your extra blood, kidney, or newborn children for one more \$60 masterpiece.

Blue Dragon

score **9.0**

- + Gorgeous graphics, (mostly) brilliant soundtrack, great quest.
- Too easy. And Ian Gillan needs to shut up. Forever.

System(s)	Xbox 360
Developer	Mistwalker
Publisher	Microsoft
Online/Multi	None
ESRB Rating	Teen
Available	August 28

MISTWALKER

Interview

Hironobu Sakaguchi

Final Fantasy creator Hironobu Sakaguchi was considering retirement after resigning from Square in 2000, but instead formed Mistwalker Studios and is now heading up a huge slate of RPG projects. He was kind enough to take a few minutes away from Lost Odyssey crunch time to reminisce about Blue Dragon and give us a peek at some of Mistwalker's other upcoming epics.

play: While Blue Dragon looks very modern, the game has a very cheerful, upbeat feel. Do you find it easier to tell dramatic stories in that context?

Hironobu Sakaguchi (Producer and Scenario Writer): I wanted to re-create [Character Designer Akira] Toriyama's world in a high-def, interactive environment. As we've seen in past works like Dragon Ball and Dr. Slump, there's an incredible charm in the way Mr. Toriyama mixes an upbeat and cheerful world with a touch of black humor. I'm a big fan of his.

changed between the Japanese and English versions of Blue Dragon. Was there any controversy on the American side over elements like the boss music? How about the Poo Snakes? Did you consider changing the difficulty?

We wanted as few differences between the versions as possible. That's just how happy we were with the way Blue Dragon turned out.

How did you end up recruiting your old colleague [Final Fantasy composer] Nobuo Uematsu to compose for Blue Dragon and Lost Odyssey?

We had discussed it a lot, and he was the first to express an interest in working together again. I felt extremely thankful for the friendship of this man with whom I'd been through so much together.

Likewise, how about Akira Toriyama? Did you have any specific requests for character design? Did he have input on the world design, as well?

We explained to him the basic concepts of characters with living shadows and such, but all the specific designs came straight





from him.

What sort of input did Mr. Toriyama have as his designs were converted into 3D models?

I prepared several different angles of the 3D renders and he made edits to them in Photoshop. We then had modeling and shading adjustments made based on his edits. Mr. Toriyama retouched even the finest details, and was involved in every aspect of the modeling.

The final segment of Blue Dragon left a lot of room for a sequel. If you were to continue the franchise, would you pick up where you left off? Or would you prefer a Final Fantasy/Dragon Quest-style sequel that is linked only by theme and mechanics?

We've been exploring a variety of ideas. I believe we'll be able to announce something soon!

You've expressed interest in the past in

"...there's an incredible charm in the way Mr. Toriyama mixes an upbeat and cheerful world with a touch of black humor."

-Hironobu Sakaguchi

doing an MMORPG, and also in doing an episodic RPG. Do you think either of these would be a good fit for the Blue Dragon franchise?

No, there's no reason it would have to be Blue Dragon. But I would love to produce a MMORPG with an original property.

Blue Dragon has revolutionized the way players approach monsters and engage in battle with them. What was the genesis of mechanics like Monster Fights and Field Skills?



All bark and no bite...even with those chompers.



Those were ideas from the original design plan that I was very passionate about including. But skills like the Field Barrier had the potential to completely destroy the game's balance, so we were adjusting it right up until the game shipped.

What other aspects of the "traditional RPG" would you like to modernize in the future? Are there any similarly revolutionary ideas at work in Lost Odyssey?

Lost Odyssey is a comparatively orthodox RPG. However, each individual component is of a very high quality, and although we're still in the final tuning stages, I think the game will have a speedy tempo not seen before in RPGs. Due to this, I think the gameplay will feel pretty groundbreaking.

Can you tell us anything more about Lost Odyssey?

Lost Odyssey is set against the backdrop of an age of industrial revolution brought upon by magic. It is a story of the hero, Kaim, a man fated never to die, and the people he meets. Kaim is mentally and physically exhausted by the countless deaths he has encountered, and I hope the player will be moved as Kaim gradually re-experiences the memories and emotions from his past. By incorporating analog stick controls, we've been able to keep the mechanics from becoming too complicated. We've also tried to capture some of the intensity

of a first-person shooter by using a shaky handheld-camera style in battles.

You were at the helm of the Final Fantasy series as it became the first RPG series to shift towards darker, angrier storylines, and many people feel the darker tone was the reason the series' popularity increased in the US. Do you agree with that theory? Was Blue Dragon created with the east in mind, and Lost Odyssey with the west?

Until Final Fantasy VII, it had always been said that RPGs don't sell in America. Neither Final Fantasy nor Dragon Quest did good business. We wanted to change this, so on FFXIII we pressed forward with really strong marketing. The fact that it was in 3D and had a dark atmosphere was also important, but without that marketing push

"I believe games take many forms. They're entertainment... if the people who play them are having fun, then it must be a good game." -Hironobu Sakaguchi



Nene's ultimate robo-army...or is it?

it might not have done as well as it did.

Is A.S.H. (Archaic Sealed Heat) still in active development for the Nintendo DS? Can you tell us more about it?

Yes, A.S.H. is coming along nicely. It's evolved into a unique hybrid of the RPG and SRPG genres. The new focus is on a party battle system that we internally call

The new face of traditional role playing. Happy?

"team tactics." Each player will be able to cultivate their own tactics based on the way their teams are assembled and developed. Depending on the composition of the team and your tactics, you might be able to easily triumph in a tough situation where most players would struggle. I think it's a very new type of system. Also, the battle visuals are very beautiful, some of the best on DS.

We're also putting a lot of work into the story, the characters, the total package.

What do you think about the Blue Dragon television anime by Studio Pierrot and the Shonen Jump manga by Takeshi Obata? Do you have any input on their stories?

It's great that the Blue Dragon world has

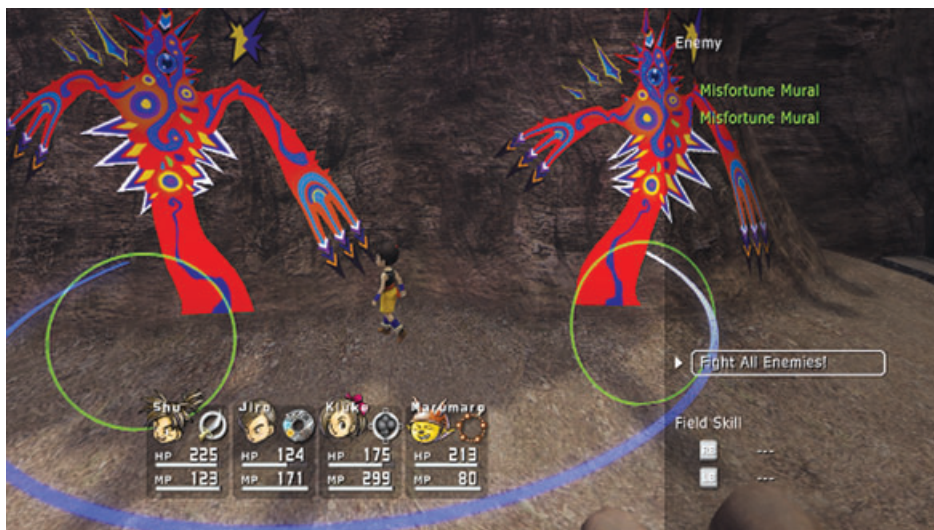
Different Takes on the Blue Dragon World



Blue Dragon wasn't conceived strictly as a video game franchise—it was created with the cooperation of Shueisha, a manga/anime giant that is currently plastering Japan with all things Blue Dragon. The current tally includes two different Blue Dragon manga series, a trading card game, dozens of toy licensing deals, and a 51-episode anime series that is now headed to North America courtesy of Viz Media.

The Blue Dragon license seems to include all of the characters, concepts, and technology from the games, but none of the storyline. So while the heroes of the anime will be familiar to players of the game, the story could not be more different. Jiro is now a hot-headed snob who serves as Zola's squire, and Shu and Kluge don't even know him at the start of the series. There are new shadows all over the place, including a giant hippo shadow wielded by a perky waitress-café type that joins the group as an anime-exclusive sixth hero. The series is targeted at a younger audience than the game, and is more light-hearted and silly: Kluge wields a gun that shoots pink fists, for example, and Shu accidentally farts when he attempts to manifest his shadow.

The Japanese version features an entirely different voice cast, marred by a horribly effete Nene; hopefully Viz will have better luck wrangling the English-language actors. The anime's storyline may baffle fans of the game, but with its excellent Studio Pierrot animation and liberal use of the game's soundtrack, it's sure to make an interesting companion piece.





been able to expand so far beyond the game, and we've been discussing the various storylines with Shueisha from the very beginning. I hope that it will expand even further in the future.

When can Americans expect enhancements such as the Shuffle Dungeon? Are there any plans for further downloadable content?

We plan to release three sets of downloadable content, as were released in Japan post-launch. While it's premature to comment on pricing, our goal is to continue to enhance the RPG experience even after 40-plus hours of gameplay. The planned downloadable content includes new

The family that plays together, stays together.

"...our goal is to continue to enhance the RPG experience even after 40-plus hours of gameplay"

-Hironobu Sakaguchi

difficulty levels, several unlockable items, and a new dungeon with 8 randomized patterns and a new set of environments and monsters.

How do you feel about the current state of the Japanese video game industry? Do you have any fears that Japan will be left behind in the worldwide market while it continues to focus on low-tech and casual games?

I believe games take many forms. They're entertainment...if the people who play them are having fun, then it must be a good game. I don't think evolution in gaming is as simple as increasing the quality of graphics.

Why do you think the Xbox 360 needs in order to succeed in Japan?

More passionate marketing.

Have you ever considered shaving your mustache, or is it too much a part of your image?

Sometimes I do shave it!

Blue Dragon had little competition when it was released in Japan, but in America it's going up against a lot of heavyweight titles. There's even another RPG (Eternal Sonata) hitting within weeks, and your own Lost Odyssey is only a few months after that! Are you concerned that Blue Dragon might get overlooked in the west?



Blue Dragon



BioShock is a shooter unlike any you've ever played, loaded with weapons and tactics never seen. Sure, you'll have an arsenal at your disposal from simple revolvers to **heat-seeking rockets** and chemical throwers, but you'll also be forced to **genetically alter your DNA** to create an even more deadly weapon—you. **INJECTABLE PLASMIDS** give you ungodly powers: blast electrical currents into water to **electrocute multiple enemies**, **FREEZE THEM SOLID** and obliterate them with the swing of a wrench, or create a swarm of attack hornets from your own mutated flesh.

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8/21/2007



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Drug Reference
Intense Violence
Sexual Themes
Strong Language



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MX vs. ATV: UNTAMED

Taste the Rainbow

words Dave Halverson

With titles like ATV: Offroad Fury, MX vs. ATV Unleashed, Splashdown and Cars to their credit, Rainbow Studios has become synonymous with top-shelf off-road racing, making their first Xbox 360/PS3 offering all the more exciting. Their calling card has always been a combination of depth, cutting-edge graphics, and physics-based fun, and it's only going to get better as their next generation of racers come into view.

Although Untamed isn't due until late this year, we thought we'd check in to see how things are progressing...

MX vs ATV: Untamed

System(s)	PS2, Wii, PSP, Xbox 360, PS3
Developer	Rainbow Studios
Publisher	THQ
Available	Q4 2007

preview

Playing dirty,
Rainbow Studios
style.

INTERVIEW

Rainbow Studios' Rob Baumsteiger, Senior Producer

play: You guys have been at the forefront of the racing genre since the dawn of 3D. What would you say is your proudest moment?

Rob Baumsteiger: Being considered as one of the elite racing games year in and year out, when you look back at what we've accomplished over the past 5 years it has been a great journey. We took a game that people thought had very little marketability, proved them wrong and have continued to improve our strong sales with each release. We also take a great deal of pride in the fact that we've been able to reach such a large variety of racing fans, without sacrificing the core rhythm racing gameplay that goes to the heart of the franchise. There's no other game on the market that delivers the same high quality of racing with as many different vehicles in as many different event types.

You were able to set the bar for the last two generations of consoles but this time out Evolution Studios struck first. Do you look at MotorStorm as the new off-road standard/game to beat?

Like you said in your first question, we've been at the forefront of the racing genre since the dawn of 3D. We consider ourselves the standard/game to beat, and everyone will see that once again when we release in late December 2007. We

don't really look at MotorStorm as the same type of game as MX. They had one world/environment that looked great with less than 10 tracks and no depth. With the MX franchise, it is all about vehicle versus vehicle, and vehicle versus the environment. We've always delivered a ton of worlds with more event types than any other game, more vehicles than any game, kept it all about the competitive racing and made it visually stunning. When racing fans see MX vs ATV: Untamed on next-generation systems, they'll see the standard/game to beat and have a ton of fun with it.

Certainly they had an advantage developing exclusively for the PS3 where you're once again developing across multiple formats. I was actually really bummed when I learned that '08 would be PSP, PS2 and on up. However, I'm told that the PS3 and 360 versions are being developed separately. Does this mean they're true thoroughbred next-gen from the ground up?

Yes, that is exactly what it means. We're rebuilding our entire engine from the ground up specifically for the PS3 and Xbox 360 versions. The great thing about the PS2, Wii, DS and PSP versions is that they're





much different content-wise than the next-gen version. The PS2 and Wii games will be a totally unique racing experience that capitalizes on the Wii controller and our vast experience developing for the PS2. The PSP and DS versions will be totally unique in their own right, with gameplay tailored to the hand-held market. Racing fans will essentially be getting five different games. Our main focus is on bringing our franchise to the next generation, producing massive detailed worlds, stunning visuals and an all-new innovative career mode. But it wouldn't be fair for us to only make the standard-setting racing game available for next-gen console owners, so we decided to make the game five different ways on all systems.

That's awesome news. Are you getting into any real-time terrain deformation?

With this product we are not getting into any real-time terrain deformation. It is something that we are looking into for future products.

What do you, as a team, consider the greatest features that the new consoles bring to the table? How will this technology change or evolve what Rainbow Studios has been doing so well for all these years?

With every console change you pretty much

have a clean slate as to the possibilities for what you can do. I think this round of consoles really allows the developer the opportunity to add detail to the game. You are seeing a huge jump in the artistic quality of the worlds, vehicles, etc. For Rainbow Studios we are making so many changes to our engine and work pipeline you are going to see a jump pretty much everywhere. The worlds will be much denser and full of life. The vehicles will be as detailed as they would in real life. The gameplay will be even more exciting than past titles as we are now able to do some things that just weren't possible on the past generation consoles, like our brand new Opencross mode.

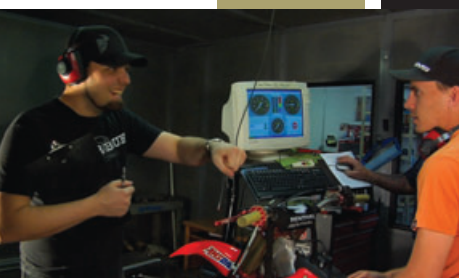
Speaking of MX ATV '08... I know that it's rife with features but let's begin with Endurocross. I'm told it's unbelievably cool...

Endurocross is unbelievably cool! It is something completely new to our franchise. The best way to describe the mode is to take a Supercross race and add all the insane elements of the outdoors like logs, rocks, oversized tires and water crossings to it. It is not just about rhythm but also

"We're re-building our entire engine from the ground up specifically for the PS3 and Xbox 360 versions."

~Rob Baumsteiger





From the Dyno
to the game.
Hearing is
believing.



survival, if you want to get around the course. One moment you are clearing a double and the next you are trying to cross thru and over a bunch of logs, rocks and tires. I think the fans of the title and the sport will find this new mode something unbelievable cool as you stated above.

Talk to me about the Mini Moto screens we're seeing. Is it an actual class now? Mini Moto is something that was present in the last game but this time around we were able to place in tracks that are specific to the 50cc motorcycle. It will be present in our X-Cross Mode.

What drove you to such madness/coolness?

What drove us to push Mini Moto this time around is just how cool it is to be a 6-foot-tall rider on a bike made for kids. Once we built the Mini Moto bike we fell in love with how much fun it was to ride around, the tricks you can pull off with it, and the power behind these mini beasts. So we really went into this game with the notion that we needed to take it to the next level.

How about Supercross career? How has it changed and evolved?

The Career aspect of the game has been completely overhauled into what we've termed X-Cross. X-Cross is an innovative career mode bringing together 8 unique racing series (Endurocross, Opencross, Supercross, Outdoor Nationals, Supermoto, Freestyle, Waypoint, and MiniMoto) and crosses them into one ultimate off-road championship. This series challenges the player to master multiple racing disciplines, vehicles, and more. By the time you finish the career you will have experienced every aspect of our game, and truly conquer the off-road. Right now it's looking like about a 30 to 40 hour gameplay experience. For the diehard fan that just wants to race the old way where you chose a vehicle and a style of race and go, we have a championship mode that will allow you to do that as well. Basically, we figured since we have more depth in player choice as far as vehicles and racing types, we should have more depth in terms of career mode as well.

What about the spectators? How have you improved things up in the stands?

The spectators have taken the next-generation leap. You will now see more detail in the stands as the crowds will move

and cheer you on as you work your way through the pack to the finish line. We have also added outdoor crowds, which is something that we have never had before. So as you are racing around the outdoor worlds you will find the crowds cheering you on here as well.

For the open-world hare 'n' hound-type races I'm sure the vehicles and riders/drivers look amazing, but will we see a marked difference between the two generations elsewhere? Will the 360 and PS3 games feature more horizon, normal mapping, and other such improvements? You will see all the next generation improvements in this game. Normal Mapping, Motion Blur, HDR, Tree Shake, Water, etc. I think when you get a chance to place your hands on the product you will see that we've made a huge leap in the artistic presentation across the board.

What about physics and body English/ rider animation? What changes have you made there for next-gen? Can we pitch the bike freely in the air, or is it limited? We continue to evolve our real-world physics model by now giving the player the ability to whip with the motorcycle or





ATV's back end, scrub over jumps, square up turns, and power slide corners. You'll find the rider to be even more fluid and now that you can whip the bikes out farther than before you will see each player adding his own style to the game.

Has real-time mud or dirt accumulation been integrated?

Yes, there is real-time mud and dirt accumulation in this MX vs. ATV: Untamed. You will also be able to drive through water crossings and wash the mud off you and your vehicle accumulated during the race.

A lot of past Motocross games have had problems taking the rider from the seated to the standing position (in many the riders never sit). Do the riders sit normally now? Do they wheelie sitting down? It may seem nitpicky but there's nothing dorkier than a wheelie standing up.

We have spent a great deal of time studying actual riders and their position on the bike. We also have a great deal of riders on the team that have given their input. You will find our riders to behave exactly like you

would expect if you were doing it in real life or watching it on TV. As for the wheelies it all depends on how fast you are going when you start to do one. If you are going slow the rider sits down to allow you more control. If you are moving at speed the rider transitions to a more standing position.

What about point of view. Are you employing a helmet cam, and if so do we see the hands work the clutch and front brake? Are there photo-real bars, cables, etc...?

Yes, there is a helmet camera in development that is extremely cool. We are currently working on the final FOV and angle so I am not sure how much of the rider's hands will be in view. As for the bars, cables, etc., all the parts in the game are based on actual parts. Each company sends in their product for us to model. So Flexx Bars will look just like Flexx Bars in the game.

What's the key dynamic to winning? Is it still a charge and boost system in concert with the terrain, or are there new dynamics?

"Our goal with every product that ships from Rainbow Studios is to raise the industry standard."

-Rob Baumsteiger



“You will find our riders to behave exactly like you would expect if you were doing it in real life or watching it on TV.”

-Rob Baumsteiger

The key to winning with our game has always been about rhythm. The smoother you are on the track the faster you will be. The game mechanic has not changed in the aspect that you still preload the big jumps. What we are working on is a “Scrub” system where the user will be able to flick the bike off a jump sideways to keep a lower trajectory in the air and get the tires back to the ground sooner. This is something new that we are working on and so far it is a very promising gameplay element.

Is the career mode (for MX bikes) strictly indoor or are there outdoor Nationals?

No, we have numerous event types and vehicles that the user will see and play in our new X-Cross Career mode. You will see events like Supercross, Outdoor Nationals, Freestyle, Mini Moto, Supermoto, Waypoint and Open Cross. Opencross is a brand new race mode which pits all the vehicles against one another in a race carved throughout our massive worlds. Players will compete in the vehicle of their choice in this no holds bar race to the finish that takes players over bridges, through rivers, rock beds, steep hills, and more. The user will learn to master all the vehicles and event types in the deepest career mode experience we've ever delivered.

What about crashes? In past games it's been all about rag-doll as the rider flips into oblivion only to appear back on the

bike. Do the riders get up, run back, pick up their bikes, kick start 'em and get back to racing or is it traditional flip-flop and you're back on the bike?

We did not go the route of having the rider run back to his bike and try and start it. We felt that it was too much of a punishment to the user if we did this. The wreck alone will be punishment enough as the rider flies through the air only to be slammed into the ground and tumble to a stop.

Are the riders set or is there a male/female create? What's the apparatus for upgrading to sponsored rider wear and from 125cc to 250cc and beyond?

There are no female riders. As for upgrades, the user will be able to choose from 100-plus companies that manufacture everything from gear to exhaust. There are

numerous things that the user will be able to do to their rider and vehicle to give it that personal touch as well as a slight edge on their opponent.

Obviously I haven't played the game yet—so what'd I miss? Tell our readers how you're going to make their new year shine...

Our goal with every product that ships from Rainbow Studios is to raise the industry standard. In the case of MX vs ATV: Untamed, we're doing this in nearly every way. This will be the deepest racing

game anyone has ever played. It will have more vehicles, more event types more overall gameplay and all the next-gen bells and whistles. And, if for some reason you haven't moved on to a 360 or PS3 yet, you'll still be able to have a totally unique experience on the Wii, PS2, PSP and DS. MX vs ATV Untamed will get your adrenaline pumping and you will definitely get more than your money's worth. If you play racing games, late December will be an extremely good month for you.



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Condemned 2

Bloodshot

Requiem for a madman

words Greg Orlando



With all due respect to Franklin Delano Roosevelt, there is considerably more to fear than fear itself. Sega and developer Monolith are busy prepping Condemned 2: Bloodshot for Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3, and you can almost taste the fear in the air. The game takes players into a strange,

first-person adventure filled with demented souls, many of who carry weaponry and hold naught but ill intent. And they're more than happy to take out their anger and frustration on the game's protagonist, Ethan Thomas.

The only thing we have to fear? Start with a well-armed psychopath, work your way down...

Condemned 2: Bloodshot

preview

System(s)	Xbox 360, PS3
Developer	Monolith
Publisher	Sega
Available	Q1 2008

Interview

Dave Hasle, Producer, Monolith Studios

play: Condemned: Criminal Origins was odd in that it used the first-person perspective, and many horror-themed adventures simply shy away from that. Can you discuss the use of first-person perspective versus third-person for a game like Condemned?

Dave Hasle, Producer: We feel you can't get more up-close-and-personal than the first-person view. Players are completely immersed, living the experience rather than simply looking in on it. Peeking around a corner, getting that feeling in your gut that someone—or something—might jump out at you in any given moment, or something might be suddenly rushing up behind you...we have found this to work best for you when you're in first-person mode. We took our original influence for this directly from scary movies with Condemned: Criminal Origins and feel that we scored big on the scary side of things. It is also a prime component of the combat system. The melee system works best for us when it is in your face and the first-person mode is very successful in bringing that feeling across.

Distance brings perspective. Now that Condemned is more than a year old, are you more properly able to identify what worked well and what didn't?

Frank Rooke, Game Designer: Before we started working on Condemned 2: Bloodshot we asked ourselves this very question. We also compiled endless

amounts of data from the press and gamer forums regarding what was successful and what wasn't, so answering this question is fairly easy. In a nutshell, what worked was the intense atmosphere, the visceral brutality of our melee combat, and the game's overall immersive nature. These elements have become the hallmark of the series and will be even more so in the next game. The forensics also falls into this category because it nicely counterbalances the violence the player

often faces. However, in the first game, the forensics mainly channeled the story but in Condemned 2: Bloodshot, we've rebuilt the system from the ground up to become more engaging, to provide a way for the player to shape their experience. All in all, the lessons learned from Condemned 1 have given us the road map for the next chapter in the series that we're fully exploiting.

Condemned 2 is subtitled Bloodshot.

What sort of meaning or relevance does it have for the game or its protagonist?

FR: The game is bloody, intense, and brutal where the player heavily relies on their fists, and whatever weapon they can get their hands on to inflict a unique style of bone-shattering pain. Condemned 2: Bloodshot captures the essence of the experience as well as provides other, more subtle relevance that will be revealed in the game.



Monolith are up to their old tricks again... Thanky!

Tell us about the plot for Condemned 2. Please omit no Earthly detail.

FR: Not to give anything away, the story is mainly about redemption with many revelations thrown in there regarding who Ethan Thomas really is and why the world around him seems to be going to shit.

How has Ethan Thomas changed, both as a game character and as a (virtual) person?

FR: Ethan has changed a great deal. In the first game he saw his life, everything that he knew, crumble right before his eyes. He was essentially a victim struggling to keep it together. Now, Ethan has hit rock



“The game is bloody, intense, and brutal where the player heavily relies on their fists, and whatever weapon they can get their hands on...”

-Dave Hasle

Fresh conduit, soon to be running red.

bottom and has nothing more to lose. The things he chooses to do are no longer reactionary. He has a fire burning inside, fueled by anger and resentment, that's hell bent on regaining control and ultimately making his enemies pay.

Discuss the many and varied pitfalls of making a sequel.

DH: The bonuses outweigh the pitfalls for us very heavily. One of the biggest issues developers face doing a sequel is retaining the fire and spirit of the team (and sometimes the team itself) who did the previous game. What worked out great for us was that everyone here on the Condemned team went into Condemned 2: Bloodshot with the excitement and passion that they had on Condemned: Criminal Origins, primarily from the fact that there was so much that we didn't get to do with Criminal Origins since the timeframe was so tight.

Another issue that teams face when doing sequels is they feel restrained from making fundamental changes as they are cautious about losing the audience that helped make the previous game a success. In our case, we knew there were a wide range of changes that we couldn't wait to implement.

A third issue that developers can commonly run into is where the publisher wants to make a quick turn-around sequel so they can cash in on the success of the previous product. SEGA has approached Condemned 2: Bloodshot with the intention of creating a game that is bigger and better in nearly every respect to Condemned: Criminal Origins and this has helped make the game more exciting for us as a team to develop.

What inspiration have you taken from other games?

FR: The entire team is filled with passionate game players with interests that range from DS gamers to hardcore PC gamers. There's nothing specific that we take from other games other than the desire to impart the same spirit into our game that make those games special to



us.

Please explain the improvements you've made to the game's combat system.

DH: The combat system is a significantly enhanced and expanded in *Condemned 2: Bloodshot*. We've always liked the feel of taking out a foe with a good, solid pipe swing to the face. That visceral feel is core to us. So we knew that whatever we brought to the surface, that core gameplay feel needed to remain. You can now use your right trigger for your right hand and your left trigger for your left hand when fighting with your fists. You can connect for combinations to increase your damage. You can pull off some special chain attacks where you can quickly dispose of an enemy. This provides a depth to the combat that we feel didn't previously exist. We've added thrown weapons (which quickly became a favorite for many of us) and that has added a great change to the fighting strategy—especially when the A.I. gets to throw the weapons as well. Another crowd favorite is the environmental finishing moves. Remember in *Condemned: Criminal Origins* when you dropped an enemy into their dazed state and you could walk up and finish them off? Now you can grab them by the neck and find items in the environment to "interact" with to do the final kill. There's also a holster that you can now use to keep a firearm that you may have become attached to. There are a whole slew of modifications and additions that we have added to the core combat experience that we're still working on and we'll be releasing more information later on.

Multiplayer for *Condemned 2* intrigues us greatly. Can you tell us what sort of multiplayer options *Bloodshot* will have?

Tarl Raney, Associate Producer, Multiplayer: One of our main goals with the multiplayer component is to try and capture the same feel of the single-player game, but with the added danger and surprise that comes from human opponents. One of our favorite modes right now is one that has the SCU team tracking down evidence with the forensic tools while the Influenced team tries to stop them.

One of the things *Condemned* did very well was balance the cerebral aspects with its more visceral ones. How will you be handling both in the sequel?

DH: We've decided to try and merge the cerebral and visceral elements a bit more in *Condemned 2: Bloodshot*. We found that players love the freaky, mess with your head, scary moments and atmosphere in the previous game and we want to ramp them up but also intertwine them more with the stronger combat experience of *Bloodshot*.

Tell us about any improvements you may have made to the game's crime investigation bits.

DH: The forensics system has gone through a complete update. The first forensic system was more about using it as a way to provide pacing and storytelling. In *Bloodshot*, we have focused on making the forensics a player-driven system where the player is in control as much as possible. We're very excited about the changes.

How has the artificial intelligence of the game's enemies evolved or improved in the sequel?

DH: We have made a conscious effort to include not only the different human fighting types of *Condemned: Criminal Origins* but to also include many more unique and different A.I. types to really keep the player on their toes and guessing. Different A.I. types include more boss-types as well as different A.I. body types...

An interesting piece of concept art for *Condemned 2* seems to show a partially reconstructed *Tyrannosaurus* skeleton. Does this play any great role in the game?

DH: No, it's purely for ambience at this time...but as always, watch your back...

What's the secret to scaring hardened game players?

DH: If we can scare ourselves (being the hardened fearless gamers who have been doing scary games for several years now), then we feel we can scare the hell out of the gamer. It's great to be in our demo-days meeting, reviewing a level and hear a yell or startled "Oh, shit" from someone who is watching. That's almost always a good sign for us...

"That visceral feel is core to us. So we knew that whatever we brought to the surface, that core gameplay feel needed to remain."

-Dave Hasle



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Available at

GameStop
power to the players



HAZE

Sweet emotion

words Brady Fletcher

As HAZE grows closer to release, the progressive first-person shooter continues to demonstrate just how far removed it is from the typical war-themed running-and-gunning. Developer Free Radical has learned a lot through the years honing their craft with TimeSplitters and GoldenEye, but with their latest, the challenge grows with brand new hardware and a directed focus on making you ponder the method of your actions. Creative director Derek Littlewood talks a bit about what it means to play HAZE...

Interview

Derek Littlewood, Creative Director

Play: Let's go back a bit: you've established the acclaimed TimeSplitters series, so what led you to abandon comfort and start something new with the latest hardware?

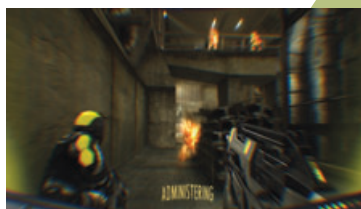
Derek Littlewood: I guess it was the challenge of it more than anything else. Some gamers seem to have the perception that developers are entirely driven by what's going to make them the most money the whole time but it just isn't the case, at least not at FRD. Obviously you have to give it some consideration—I mean, you need to keep the company running at the end of the day—but there's a lot of talented creative people at FRD who love their work, and want to be making innovative, interesting games, and challenging themselves with creating games that are different to anything they've done before. And that's where HAZE comes from—that desire to stretch ourselves, to tell a different type of story, set in a visually distinct world, and to overcome a new



set of technical hurdles that we've never tackled before, such as four player co-op and loading-screen-free campaign play. We love TS—we always will—but there's also a strong desire to keep on pushing ourselves, and to turn our skills to new and different types of game.

What would you say are some of the most obvious influences you've taken from TimeSplitters?

All the experience of what makes a great first person shooter, for one. That means



the whole feel of the thing, the satisfaction gained from just shooting a gun, the effects, the realistic sense of motion in the first-person camera—everything to make the first-person experience feel “just right.” The feel of the guns and camera are things that sometimes get overlooked, but for us it's the absolute starting point for a good FPS; after all if it doesn't feel right moving and shooting then that's a problem, because you do that more than anything else in the game! Some people have asked about the humor in the game too, because HAZE is clearly darker and more serious than TS, but don't worry: the humor's a little different in tone, but it's certainly still there.

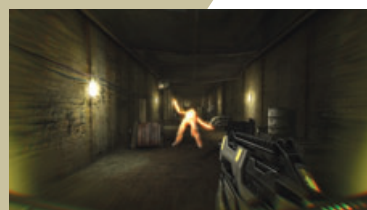
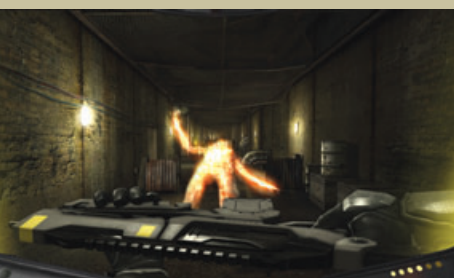
You guys are talking a lot about the drive for “emotion” behind Haze.

Well, it's the most important thing at the end of the day, isn't it? All of the best games engage you emotionally, whether it be the terror caused by the chain-

saw-wielding maniac in Resident Evil 4 (including the relief when you escape from him) or the joy of seeing your gang of LocoRocos singing in unison. So really, the idea of focusing on creating certain emotions in a game is nothing new. However most games focus on just those two emotions: fear and happiness, and when we started making HAZE, the question we were interested in was whether it's possible for games to make the player feel a wider range of emotions than that. For instance, is it possible to make a player feel guilt or remorse? It's been interesting to hear people's initial reactions to our comments about the emotional content of the game—particularly the sentiment shared by a number of people that they don't want a game to explore a wider range of emotions or to have a deeper message, they just

“I think the fact that HAZE tries to explore a wider range of emotions makes it a more compelling, more enjoyable experience, not less.”

Derek Littlewood, Creative Director

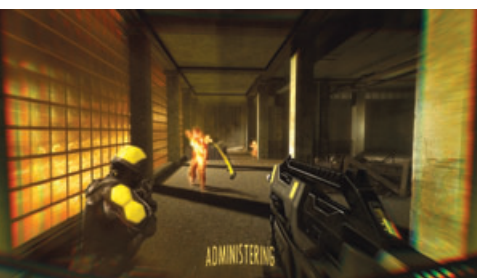




want it to be fun. But they're not mutually exclusive things. I think the fact that HAZE tries to explore a wider range of emotions makes it a more compelling, more enjoyable experience, not less.

When I spoke early on in Haze's development cycle at E3 last year, the first thing I was told was this is not at all a typical war game. That you want to address the accountability of killing. So challenge my skepticism. I think the only game I've ever played where I actually thought about my actions in any meaningful way was the unlikely Shadow of the Colossus. Put it this way: What was it about Shadow of the Colossus that made you think about your actions? It was the fact that it revealed something to you which made you look at them in a different light. As gamers we're very used to blindly following our orders, confident that we're definitely doing 'the right thing', and the idea of playing upon that to send a message to the player is the key to HAZE.

You know, we do have so many



Administering pain the Free Radical way.

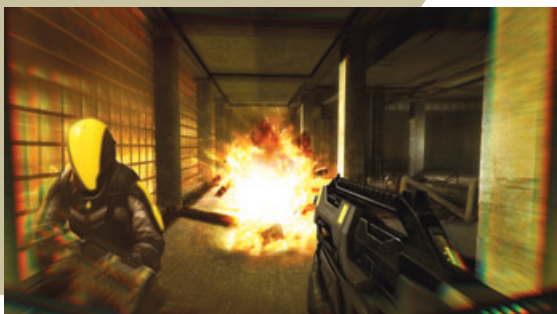
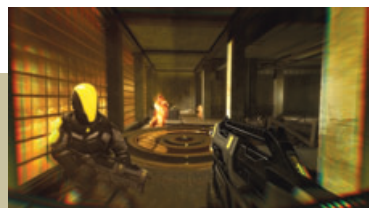
games that focus on war and the likes of the military, you must admit it really is a challenge to bring a new angle to the table.

The FPS market is a hugely competitive one, so yeah, from that perspective it is hard to really mark yourself out, but at the same time I think the FPS has a lot of room for growth yet. The first-person perspective has huge potential for immersion and I think we're only just beginning to really explore that, so really, I think there's plenty more angles to be explored yet.

You're certainly familiar with the genre by now, but what's one of the biggest difficulties you've faced with Haze? Coming up with the name, probably: it was called "Game 5" for ages!

I really loved what you guys did with Second Sight. Are you exploring any of the same themes you touched on in that game?

It's interesting actually. One of the more minor details in Second Sight was the idea of giving the player the sense that the guards and soldiers they encountered were more than just mindless drones, that they had lives beyond what you saw of them in the game, with wives, families, etc.



There was only a handful of places in the game where we did it but it was amazing how many people it struck a chord with. And that idea of trying to get the player to see the characters in the game as three-dimensional human beings rather than simply targets to be shot at is very much part of what HAZE is about, too.

Would you say in some ways HAZE owes its approach to story telling from Second Sight? You were definitely doing some original and unique things with Second Sight that deserves more attention...

Second Sight was an important step for the company, even if it didn't set the sales charts alight as we would've hoped. At that point after TS2, I think it was important to show that we weren't just a one-trick pony and that we could tell a strong, compelling story in a game, because the TimeSplitters games aren't first and foremost about plot. We were very proud of Second Sight, it perhaps got overlooked in some quarters because many of the things it does well are relatively subtle, and it doesn't really reveal its true nature until very late in the game, but we still get a lot of people saying how much they loved the game and that's always flattering! HAZE definitely continues where we left off with it in terms of trying to tell an interesting, compelling story within a game, and also many of the things we learned from making Second Sight have been of enormous use in the development of HAZE.

Recently I've been struck by how much of a jump we're seeing in the sheer technical quality of game engines. But talk to me a bit about what this new technology is doing for you guys beyond just the obvious fidelity of the presentation.

Fidelity gets a bit of a bad rep, to be honest. I mean, when I turn to face a squad-mate in HAZE and you can see the pain on his face after being shot, that's a clear example of somewhere that increased fidelity increases my immersion in the game. HAZE also features our Disparity Rendering System, which is basically a means of depicting several different versions of

the same environment and being able to switch between them at will. This is what powers the moments when the player's nectar supply is disrupted, as seen in our recent Ubideays demo, with the world going from appearing sunny and bright to dark, stormy and altogether more hellish. The DRS makes heavy use of screen filtering and post-processing and it's the PS3 that makes that possible. Oh, and not forgetting our seamless level to level streaming, which is only possible due to the Cell's multithreaded nature, as it can stream and decompress environments whilst simultaneously allowing the rest of the game to play as normal.

What's going on with co-op?

Many of my very best gaming experiences have been with co-op games, probably because they work well even if there's a large skill deficit between the players, as opposed to competitive games which generally work best when all players are of a similar skill level. And I suck at a lot of games! As a result, four-player online co-op was designed into HAZE from day one, and has been at the core of every decision we've made about the game, from engine functionality to level design. This means we're able to offer some very cool features, including the ability to mix splitscreen and online games, and the ability to easily drop in and out of a game. For instance, when playing a singleplayer campaign, a second player can join in simply by tapping the PS button on a second controller. The screen will simply split in half and you can continue playing; no messing about in menus, no reloading the level, just the two of you continuing the fight!

How would you describe the art style and tone of Haze? You guys created some of the more distinct imagery in games with TimeSplitters and Second Sight.

"Stunning" is the first word that leaps to mind! Honestly, I always knew we had a lot of talented artists here at the company, and the TS games and Second Sight are definitely testament to that, but even I didn't really realize just what they'd be capable of set loose on PS3. Obviously,

it's a more realistic looking game than our previous titles, which was a deliberate move on our part as the story of HAZE is a darker, grittier experience that suits a more realistic treatment. I think it was important to us as well that we made a clear visual distinction between HAZE and TimeSplitters, partly to show that our range of creative talents stretches beyond the TimeSplitters universe but also so that people would treat HAZE as a fresh, new thing, rather than simply an extension of what we've done before. It's always important to have a clear visual identity to your game though—something we had with the TS games, as you say. That's something that's definitely been more difficult with HAZE as a more realistic game is always going to be harder to distinguish visually than a more stylized one, and that was part of the logic behind the redesign of the trooper characters. But I think now we definitely have something where when people look at a screen-shot, they go "Yeah, that's HAZE..."

There's been a lot of talk about how you are approaching AI...

It's definitely one of the areas that is most ripe for improvement in gaming generally, because creating an opponent that is both convincingly realistic whilst still providing a substantial challenge for the player is an enormously difficult task. A general misconception is that improving AI is always about making it smarter, about making it a tougher opponent to beat but we've found the challenge with HAZE is more about making them more

believable. It's easy to create an enemy who can hit the player with a perfect headshot from a mile away, but to create one who can inspire fear, or empathy in the player, a character who you actually regret killing, that's what's interesting, and also the most difficult thing to do. Exactly why that's important relates back to what I was saying about the different emotions we want to inspire in the game—and AI is one of the key tools we use to do that.

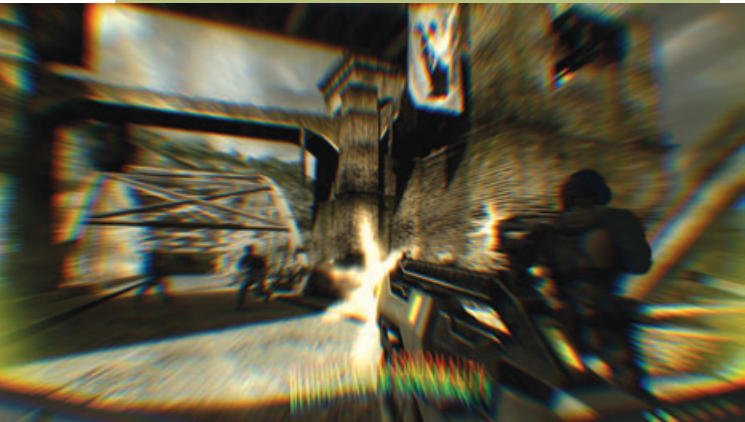
Last question: you guys have been doing FPS for almost a decade, since GoldenEye. What defines the Free Radical touch? And what makes a great FPS?

Attention to detail. Just like the way you could shoot the caps off the guards in GoldenEye, read the chatroom conversation between a guard and his girlfriend in Second Sight, or the way you can stand around in HAZE's jungle and find that a butterfly comes to settle on your gun. We always try and go that extra step, adding that extra layer of detail to reward the player who experiments in the game world. It's important because it expands the game world for the player, encourages them to go and experiment and find other details elsewhere, because you're always going to be more likely to come back to a game that you think you might not have seen all of than one you know you have. And I think the little details always make the world feel more compellingly real, because while the real world is full of cause and effect, videogame worlds are traditionally full of dead ends, of causes without effects. Every extra detail you add narrows that gap, and helps your game feel more real.

"We always try and go that extra step, adding that extra layer of detail to reward the player who experiments in the game world."

Derek Littlewood, Creative Director

Haze		preview
System(s)	PS3, Xbox 360, PC	
Developer	Free Radical Design	
Publisher	Ubisoft	
Online/Multi	1-16 players	
Available	November	



Take aim at Haze this November.





Vol. 3 Redemption hack//G.U.

The final step to Redemption draws near

words Dai Kohama

disclaimer: If you're not one of the .hack faithful, or haven't yet finished .hack//GU Vol.2, you're going to want to skip this preview.

In a serial such as .hack, it's impossible to discuss the ongoing drama without making reference to previous installments. This means *major spoilers*. Be warned!

If you're at all like me, the cliffhangers between .hacks keep me up at night. Literally. The finest thing about the series is its labyrinthine plot, and the end of Vol.2 was quite a kicker: Haseo's climactic confrontation with his nemesis Tri-Edge revealed the evil PKK's shocking true identity, in what was perhaps one of the finest twists in the history of interactive entertainment. Having finally defeated the being he knew as Tri-Edge, Haseo is left to contemplate his archival's final words: "Get stronger, Haseo! Strong enough to destroy me!"...

Haseo's new Xth Form comes complete with two incredibly powerful weapons: the dual guns.



"Of course, a new volume of .hack doesn't just mean new story. In Vol.3, players will gain control of Haseo's ultimate form, even more powerful than his 3rd—the Xth Form."

But why does Ovan seek to force Haseo's development? Even with Tri-Edge defeated, why are Haseo and his friends still unable to log out of The World? Two acts into this epic three-act tale, countless mysteries still remain: Avatars, AIDA, the elements of Morganna, Epitaph Users, the Key of the Twilight, and Aura. Are there, indeed, answers to be had?

You bet. And they're all in Vol.3. If you've come this far with Haseo, there's no turning back now: Having played through the original Japanese version of Vol.3, I can tell you that rarely does a video game story wrap up as decisively and satisfyingly as this. When one considers the year or more we as .hack fans have all invested in it, its quality becomes that much more impressive.

Of course, a new volume of .hack doesn't just mean new story. Although nothing as original as Vol.2's Crimson VS card game is added, in Vol.3 players will gain control of Haseo's ultimate form, even

more powerful than his 3rd—the Xth Form. In this mode, Haseo gains a pair of dual guns that totally change his combat style, allowing the player to rack up combos that were previously impossible. Coupled with all the weaponry he's acquired over the course of the last two games, controlling this ultimate version of Haseo feels like a well-deserved gift to the longtime fan.

There's not much more that can be said about Vol.3 without spoiling things, so stay tuned for next issue, which will feature the full review and a special interview with .hack and CyberConnect2 mastermind Hiroshi Matsuyama. Just rest assured—you can take it from me that .hack//GU Vol.3: Redemption will turn out to be everything you want it to be.

.hack//GU Vol. 3 Redemption

System(s)	PlayStation 2
Developer	CyberConnect2
Publisher	Namco Bandai
Online/Multi	Virtual
Available	September 10

preview

Rise of the Argonauts

From stop motion to next generation

words Brady Fiechter

does a role-playing game have to focus so heavily on inventory and stat management to be effective and still communicate its traditional goals? Liquid Entertainment, the creatives behind Rise of the Argonauts, decided from the start that hanging around too long in idiosyncratic menus and tracking endless hitpoints wasn't going to be a part of their toolset. They don't want the game to be known as RPG-lite, but more of a cinematic experience that's rooted in the genre's world sensibilities.

It's the scope of the setting of Rise of the Argonauts that immediately recalls the familiar nature of a role playing journey. In search of the Golden Fleece, you play as Greek mythology's Jason, a great warrior who travels through a chain of islands, which open in groups of three as the one before it is conquered. Some branches on the way become strictly linear, allowing the story to take focus, while others are wide open. Alliances will be formed, with such Argonauts as Hercules, Achilles and Atlanta bringing their various strengths and vulnerabilities to the party. Direct

control stays with Jason, while his partners form around the action, joining for group attacks and striking out on their own.

Instead of applying a copious amount of animation routines to depict the combat—the argument is that you tire seeing the same canned thing over and over—the decision was made to modify character movements in real time. A strike registers force and momentum across a number of points, resulting in physics-based reactions meant to maintain dynamic believability. This system puts less demand on the game engine as well, freeing up more power



“Weapons are earned, transformed by the gods into new forms through sacrifice.”

to drive the world, the effects, the AI.

Combat was the first thing Liquid focused on when laying the foundation to Rise of the Argonauts. Lengthy, memorized combos were never a thought, replaced with powerful moves that emerge in relation to the enemy you are facing. For example, string together a few heavy attacks on a phoenix, and an automatic special attack may play out, slashing the creature's underbelly. The presentation is part of the illusion of greater empowerment.

After a satisfying kill, you'll never be looting for money or items. Weapons are earned, transformed by the gods into new forms through sacrifice. When you meet with a god at a temple, deeds performed during the journey—discovering a secret, destroying a certain number of enemies, saving an innocent—are rewarded with new powers, gifted in relation to the god you choose to trust. If you instill favor with, say, Ares, he'll reward you with a miracle during battle, setting the enemy against each other in riot. Anger him, and he'll turn against you.

Transporting you back and forth from island to island is the Argo, a floating headquarters that will become more valuable through time. Recruits take up stay here; talk a blacksmith into joining the crew and you have a direct line to more weapon upgrades and ship repairs.

While there is a main thread that weaves through all the islands, certain

stops reveal their own unique conflicts and subplots. Each island contains a theme and moral underpinning, which Liquid hopes will lend Rise of the Argonauts a gravity that impacts more than the best inventory management ever will.

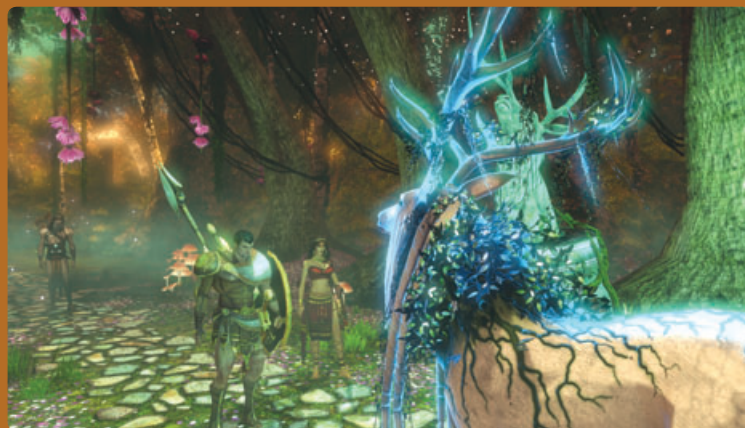
Rise of the Argonauts

System(s)	PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC
Developer	Liquid Entertainment
Publisher	Codemasters
Online/Multi	TBA
Available	2008

preview



Somewhere Harryhausen is smiling...



Heavenly Sword

Heaven Indeed

words Dave Halverson



Since that fateful E3 in 2005 when Sony unveiled a string of demos that would be scrutinized for months, I've waited... Through the chaotic launch and subsequent mud slinging through the months of mending that followed, my eye has been on one game-- Heavenly Sword. As much as MotorStorm and the upcoming Insomniac and Naughty Dog games have proven that the console is indeed a force to be reckoned with, nothing to me screams next-gen like Heavenly Sword.

As much of a technology whore that I've become, I still appreciate gameplay and especially art to an equal degree. Most recently Odin Sphere redefined 2D graphics and action-role-playing gameplay and now the same transition has been bestowed upon the height of modern epics. All of the devices that God of War ushered in, along with new endemic play mechanics and the most

"It's evident from the moment you lay hands on Heavenly Sword that this is the dawn of a new day."

gratifying combat ever, merge with a new level of cinematography and performance art in Heavenly Sword. This is a true breakthrough.

As the second level opens, Kai is by Nariko's side as she comes to, offering a choice of tasty snacks. Her facial animation and lip synching is like nothing you have ever seen and it actually transitions into the game. Our first look at Nariko, it's utterly spooky how real she is... Note the scar on her lower left leg. It too transitions to the in-game model. Watching her drag her sword around like Guts' Rage, it was all I could do to contain myself. This is a new heroine for the ages.

It's evident from the moment you lay hands on Heavenly Sword that this is the dawn of a new day. The gameplay is rewarding across the boards, the intricate fighting we've seen so much of is easily assimilated, with two main attack buttons that act as a base for Nariko's varied attacks. Holding down L or R changes her move set, but the heart of the system is linking combos and parrying. The rhythm is easy to find and leads to the quick



filling of a special-move gauge, which can be deployed at stage one, two, or three with varying degrees of effect and unholy animation. It's simple yet utterly satisfying, especially given the picture- in-picture presentation that leads into each feature skirmish. Real actors and real emotion are at the heart of every encounter and story arc. Flying Fox' metal spines quiver as he taunts, and Whiplash, an abomination of woman and shark, gets in your face like a mutant scorned. In between, Ninja Theory allows us to breathe and soak in the fruits of their labor. Just walking or running is eventful taking it all in. Elsewhere, throwing discs and using bow and arrow (as Nariko's Bjork-like emissary Kai, who is surprisingly playable) the camera follows each projectile with steering via Sixaxis. Guiding an arrow into an enemy's head or calf is as rewarding as flinging a shield across an open chasm to throw a switch. There are spots of rapture everywhere as

Hold L, push Square, let fly.



you make your way from battle to battle. Level two was filled with great gameplay, unbelievable cinema, two fierce bosses and a sense of panoramic awe that raised the bar at every turn. Art imitating life has never been so beautiful. I was right.

Heavenly Sword

preview

System(s)	PS3
Developer	Ninja Theory
Publisher	SCEA
Available	September

Pretty much sums up why I love video games.



College administrators have yet to weigh in on whether playing the video game Beowulf will, in fact, count toward a degree in English literature and simultaneously earn three to five credits in the humanities. It will be telling, and a true condemnation of the state of higher learning in the United States, if they do not.

With Beowulf, Ubisoft ventures into uncharted territory as far as the game industry is concerned. Beowulf is the first game to be made on an epic poem.

Why do they still make PS2 games again?

Originally unnamed, this poem came to be known as Beowulf after its protagonist. It is of English origin and was written by an unknown author sometime around 800 A.D., although it's very likely the poem existed in oral tradition long before that. And, if nothing else, Beowulf is notable for being the oldest surviving epic in English literature.

The poem tells of a Scandinavian warrior named Beowulf. In the course of his adventures Beowulf fights three major foes in a demon named Grendel, Grendel's mother, and a huge dragon. In true heroic fashion Beowulf slays them all, becomes

"Beowulf is the first game to be made on an epic poem..."

BEOWULF

Game gone literary...

words Greg Orlando





king, and dies in combat.

Beowulf has long been taught in high schools and colleges, and it's recently come into prominence once again through a new translation by Nobel award-winning author Seamus Heaney, and a soon-to-be-released movie translation courtesy of famed comic book writer Neil Gaiman.

The film promises to be epic in its own right. An all-star cast has been signed, including Anthony Hopkins as King Hrothgar, Angelina Jolie as the voice of Grendel's mother, and creepy Crispin Glover as the fiendish Grendel. Its mature themes and reliance on excessive violence will likely earn the film an R rating from the Motion Picture Association of America.

As for Beowulf the game, well, Ubisoft is banking on it being something special as well. It has already been shown, albeit behind closed doors, to judges whose job it is to select the best titles appearing at this year's Electronic Entertainment Expo. Beowulf will likely face stiff competition from established titles such as Spore, Halo 3, and Mass Effect, but judges have, in confidence, suggested Ubisoft may have a dark horse contender on its hands. Like the poem and film that inspired it, the game will likely embrace its violent side; Ubisoft fully expects an M rating from the Entertainment Software Rating Board.

As Beowulf, players will get to rescue, enlist the help of, and command allies. These allies can then be used in gameplay, performing functions like opening massive doors or rowing the great longship Drakar. Allies (called thanes) can also be upgraded with more powerful weaponry and abilities.

Beowulf will be possessed with the strength of 30 men, the game's literature suggests, and his combat prowess augmented with a special carnal power. This carnal power will allow the protagonist to, appropriately, exercise even more superhuman feats of strength such as pummeling gigantic monsters with stone columns.

The game follows Beowulf throughout his adventures, culminating with his reign as king and, most probably, his battle with the dragon. Promotional material for the game suggests Beowulf will include 20 years of the hero's tale not covered in the movie. It is likely, then, that the movie glosses over the same materials the epic poem does: the hero's rise to the throne. In this, Ubisoft will have a great deal of room to maneuver and take appropriate artistic license. And, ultimately, the company will have to deal with the pressing issue of the poem's conclusion. Beowulf defeats the dragon with the aid of his ally Wiglaf, but is himself killed.

Heroism will be defined this October, shortly before the release of the Beowulf film.

Beowulf

System(s)	Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, PSP, PC
Developer	Tiwak/Ubisoft Shanghai
Publisher	Ubisoft
Available	October

preview



Looney Tunes: Acme Arsenal

That wasn't all folks

words Dave Halverson

With Looney Tunes: Acme Arsenal, what you see is pretty much what you get. Warner Bros.' aim seems to be at allowing their esteemed alumni to do what they do best (go mental), plain and simple. No high concepts, no complex controller schemes, menus or sub screens—just pure run, jump, and brawl gameplay as only Bugs and company can bring it. Acme is on course to become HD gaming's first pure action/arcade tour de force if developer Red Tribe can overcome the fact that it's also appearing on that wascawy Wii. Although both games boast spectacular player models and share identical gameplay, the 360 title seems to be falling victim to the cross-platform development. Not because of the absence of any normal mapping (which could be a choice, no matter how questionable), but for its limited visibility and simplistic architecture with set dressings such as rocks and enemies appearing suspiciously low-poly.

As nicely as the game is coming along, as a 360/PS3 slut I find myself ever so critical of cross-platform development—

struggling with the fact that I'm paying the price for a publisher to enjoy the benefit of retailing on vastly different consoles. I can live without normal mapping (especially in a toon world), but I thought the days of faded, flat-shaded vistas were behind me. With any luck these were a product of the game's pre-beta nature, although I'm quite sure that the architecture is final, or close to it. The good news is that the action is good enough (although the character animation and feel still need some fixing) that the fogging isn't a total buzz kill, and that much of the game takes place indoors where it looks more like a living cartoon. The real-time lighting, model integrity and effects are exceptional, and the action is a refreshing throwback to those simplistic 16-bitters of old. The platforming is especially welcome, rigged with all manner of timing and pattern-based tomfoolery, and the combat is straight out of toon town. Each character has their own set



Bugs whips out the big (Acme) guns.



“The platforming is especially welcome, rigged with all manner of timing and pattern-based tomfoolery, and the combat is straight out of toon town.”

of trademark moves including a melee skill, spin, and ground pound, but the real fun comes by way of the Acme gizmos strewn about, or snatched from your enemy's grasp. The infamous accordion glove, various boom sticks, snapping jaw launchers and so forth are pulled straight from the archives along with the level designs, capers and characters, which run the gamut of WB favorites: Yosemite Sam, Taz, Marvin, Daffy, Foghorn Leghorn, Sylvester, Bugs, and a character yet to be named, all make the scene. As first “hands-on” (how I despise that phrase) sessions go, I'm confident that the end product here will live up to the namesake, if not reenergize these wonderful characters for generations to come, even though what I'm really after is the first HD Taz epic. I think the world is ready for the next round of Taz-Mania. Until then, here comes the “boom!”

Looney Tunes: Acme Arsenal

preview

System(s)	Xbox 360, Wii
Developer	Red Tribe
Publisher	Warner Bros. Int. Ent.
Available	Sept. 18



Marvin admires the sweet level design.

Soul Calibur Legends

It burns, burns, burns...

words Greg Orlando

this time, the soul will not only burn but also flail wildly. Think of Soul Calibur: Legends as Namco Bandai's great experiment. The game takes the beloved Soul Calibur franchise to the Nintendo Wii for the first time, but certainly not in the way anyone expects. Legends is not a fighting game, but rather a third-person adventure. It's a spin-off of its parent series in the vein of Mortal Kombat's branching tale Shaolin Monks—with the great hope, of course, being that Legends does not mirror Monks' quality. Legends was a bright spot at a recent Namco Bandai's pre-E3 gamer's day. The game's existence came as a surprise to no one; Japanese game magazine Famitsu had heralded the title months ago. What was surprising is the game's essentially aesthetic scheme and its fluidity of motion. The apple, then, may not have fallen far...

Despite the game being shown live, not a lot of details emerged about Legends, and certainly no one from the press got to actually play it. What is known is that characters such as Siegfried, Taki, Mitsurugi, Ivy, and Astaroth will be playable in Legends. A new hero, Iska, joins the cast for Legends, too, and serves as

the game's protagonist. No other fighters from the Calibur series were mentioned or seen, but it seems likely the entirety of the cast may be destined for at least a guest appearance or, perhaps, a fleeting cameo. Legends offers a party like it's 1599.

There will be brawling aplenty, obviously, fleshed out with huge boss fights wherein players can choose two heroes and switch between them at will. In addition to the fights, players can expect traps and, quite possibly, basic puzzle solving.

The game promises to use the Wii remote and nunchuk to move the combatants and perform attacks. Currently, the nunchuk's joystick moves a hero, and shaking the device performs a quick evasion dodge or roll. The remote is used to divest enemies of their right to life. Vertical and horizontal slashes as well as circular motions were used to create the various attacks. Button presses on the remote will handle jumping and blocking maneuvers.

Namco has suggested each character will have his or her own control style, although this may either be hyperbole, a mistranslation, or simply some overeager developer's cuckoo-bananas fantasy. Given the Wii's imprecise translation of remote and nunchuk input, it seems unlikely Namco would be able



This is your Wii on Namco...



“Namco has suggested each character will have his or her own control style, although this may either be hyperbole, a mistranslation, or simply some overeager developer’s cuckoobananas fantasy.”



to generate enough specific, recognizable motions for the console to detect.

The controls, then, are the game’s great question mark. Simply, it has to be asked if Namco can make the motion controls work within the context of a brawling third-person adventure. Of course anyone can shake, slash, and gesticulate wildly for brief periods of time, but doing so for extended periods is a disheartening prospect at best. Anyone who’s played *Marvel Ultimate Alliance* can attest to the fact that making a flicking motion to perform a basic attack gets old in record time. The game’s director has already gone on record as saying *Legends’* levels will take anywhere from 5 to 15 minutes to complete...

Multiplayer support will be included, both in terms of cooperative and competitive play. It’s likely the game will play out in split screen with two players, but certainly this aspect of the game is still being worked on.

Legends has been tapped for release in November of this year, and serves as an appetizer of sorts for the main course: *Soul Calibur IV*, complete with a huge-breasted female fighter Ivy, will see release sometime in 2008. And yes, all involved are delightedly waiting for the triumphant return to the stage of history that only the *Calibur* series can provide.

Let me guess... rotate the Wiimote?



Soul Calibur: Legends

System(s)	Wii
Developer	Namco Bandai Games
Publisher	Namco Bandai Games
Online/Multi	1-2 players
Available	Fall

preview

Zack and Wiki

Quest for Barbaros' Treasure

Only on Wii...really!

words Heather Campbell

When I was six, my parents bought me a PCjr. Sure, they said it was from Santa Claus, but the network clay-mation specials showed me that Santa was only capable of crafting wooden rocking horses and toy cars. Santa couldn't make a computer. My PCjr was a technical powerhouse, and it was on that machine at the tender first-grade age of seven that I learned how to type. The game that taught me was Sierra's King's Quest.

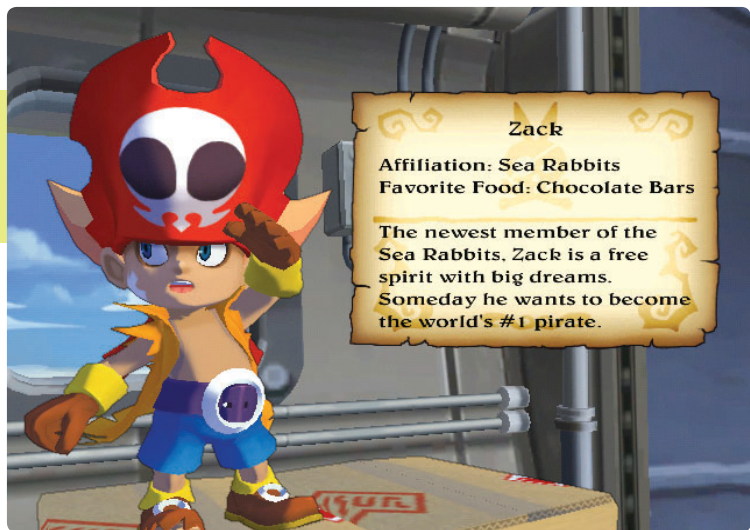
Before consoles dominated the American games market, the lucky few amongst us played PC games to get our gaming fix. Sure, I had a Nintendo – but for the deeper, more challenging games, my Mom would pull out a floppy disk and force me to type, “MOVE ROCK” over and over again. By 10, I was a brilliant typist. But boy, did I hate puzzles. Linked to learning a new skill, puzzle solving was as tedious as QWERTY key placement... and I never beat a single King's Quest game, even though we purchased them until mice were pack-ins with PCs.

Which reminds me. I was really, hypocritically angry when the King's Quest series became point-and-click based. That was when I gave up on adventure games, and got into the rigorous (yet relaxing) challenge of RPGs.

Zack and Wiki: Quest for Barbaros' Treasure is an adventure game that picks up where I left off. Using the Wii-mote to interact with every grab-able, curious



“The truth is, even at this early stage in the game’s development, I want to sell you on Zack and Wiki.”



facet of the game world, Z&W is a classic game for modern times. It's intuitive, frustrating, charming... and youthful. The internet is already abuzz with pre-release hype. Gamers want you to look past the Wind Waker cel-shading and see the difficult puzzles within.

I don't think the style is what should be taken to task here; as anime has taught us, cel-shaded pictures don't necessarily mean all-ages content. Killer7, after all, was a cell-shaded, adult affair. And a GameCube original, to boot.

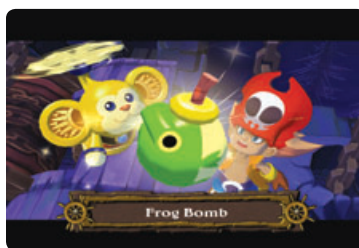
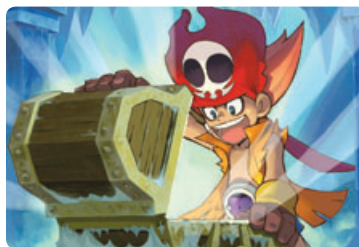
What's too bad about Zack and Wiki is that the puzzles are complicated enough to induce controller throwing (thank god for the Wii-strap), but the tone of the game is young. Don't get me wrong—the Wii NEEDS original titles to survive in a market dominated by HD gaming—but what the system needs more is simple, hardcore games that appeal to gamers. I don't want Nintendo to give up on us, but sometimes it seems like they've abandoned the faithful to run towards a mini-game ground. Capcom, meanwhile, is struggling to find a compromise. Zack and Wiki is original, unique gameplay, but it's lathered in a condescending kiddy air. We don't mind shaking the Wiimote to emulate the action of a pulley, a flute, or a saw. However, we may be embarrassed by a chirpy golden

monkey congratulating us with "Ding!"

The truth is, even at this early stage in the game's development, I want to sell you on Zack and Wiki. This is a preview, after all, and the purpose is to generate enthusiasm for games that Play believes in. The Wiimote/Nunchuk gameplay of Zack and Wiki is new. The innovation is exciting stuff. The story is One-Piece lawsuit fodder, about a funny-haired pirate who seeks the wealth of Treasure Island—but that's not why we play a game like this. Story doesn't fuel this engine; puzzle-defeating ego does.

Pointing the Wiimote at the screen, players draw Zack's attention to various objects. Press a button and Zack interacts. Wiki, the aforementioned golden monkey, has separate powers. Shake the Wiimote and Wiki turns into a bell. Sometimes the shrill sound will turn foes into more interactive objects. In the first level alone, Wiki makes a scorpion into a saw. Grab the saw by getting Zack's attention with Wiimote wand, and then saw through a nearby tree by shaking the Nintendo stick. Later, you'll be grabbing blocks, pushing boxes, and playing instruments to get to the treasure chests that Zack thirsts after.

The puzzles are difficult, which is what makes this game befuddling. Clothed in



There's that frog bomb I was looking for!

children's colors, this is an adult game with kid themes. I got stuck more than once. I can't imagine kids doing any better. But maybe that's what this game is all about. Maybe it's like time travel, designed to bring Wii-owning adults back to the PCjr past. The Zork games, the Monkey Island games, and yes – the King's Quest games weren't necessarily adult fare. They were puzzles, and the stories were just thread that stitched the puzzles together. I'm not a fan of puzzle games. But I'm overjoyed at the work Capcom has put into this title. It's polished, and it's important for the Wiibrary. We need more original games for this system, and Zack and Wiki (wow, that's a terrible name) is a step in the very right direction.

Zack and Wiki: Quest for Barbaros' Treasure

System(s)	Wii
Developer	Capcom
Publisher	Capcom
Online/Multi	NA
Available	Fall 2007





guitar hero encore: rocks the '80s

Hair Metal revival

words Heather Campbell

I was at a party the other night where the living room was dedicated to Guitar Hero II. Considering the turnout—namely, non-gamers who were more interested in Hollywood than Halo—I would have to say that Guitar Hero 2 is officially mainstream. The scene reminded me of the late '90s, when every frat bash on earth had a copy of Super Mario Kart 64 running on an old TV in the corner. I watched a casual gamer teach a girl in a short skirt how to play. Congrats, Red Octane. I think you got that dude laid.

It's not going to be long before these LA parties need more songs, though. Enter Guitar Hero Encore: Rocks the '80s. If PlayStation 2 had a functional online presence, these would be downloadable tracks and a new skin for your existing copy of GH2. Instead, Harmonix has made the wise decision of selling this in-stores to the very people who threw this party last week. For those intimidated by IP addresses, grabbing the box is going to be much easier than trying to set up a subscription to an online service, anyhow. It doesn't change the fact that the game feels like an expansion pack, though.

With thirty or so new songs from the

likes of Iron Maiden, Anthrax, Oingo Boingo, and Twisted Sister, the playlist sails through the hairspray fumes of metal and pop. This is, however, an encore. Don't expect the game to be too different; the character roster may be dressed in '80s clothing, but they're the same old faces we learned to love in GH2 proper. The difficulty is turned down a notch, too—not due to a difference in design, but by virtue of the melodies of 80's music.

Also unchanged are the venues that our band passes through on their journey from garage to god. Sure, the colors are a little gaudier, but the cameras cut the same way and the furniture sits in the same spots. This is not Guitar Hero III. That's where the changes will be. Encore is for those who've mastered everything GH2 has to offer, or those who just want more tracks in their North Hollywood living rooms.

Personally, I know a lot more of the tunes here than in GH2, so the game is more exciting for me—although it's been reported that my favorite song ("I Want Candy" by Bow Wow Wow) won't make it to the final build. Which means we'll have to go on...wanting candy.

Pentagrams on the fret board: Sign us up!



"Personally, I know a lot more of the tunes here than in GH2, so the game is more exciting for me..."

Guitar Hero Encore: Rocks The '80s

System(s)	PlayStation 2
Developer	Harmonix Music Systems
Publisher	Red Octane/Activision
Available	July 17, 2007

preview



Culdcept Saga

Like Monopoly, but with demons...

words Greg Orlando

the Xbox 360 has certainly not suffered from a dearth of board-trading card game fusions. Yet the prevailing sentiment with

Culdcept Saga is, certainly, it's about time. Odd as the three-legged goat, Culdcept offers players the opportunity to build a deck of 50 cards. The game offers 470 cards in total, and these allow players to summon creatures, boost a monster's fighting capabilities, and influence movement across the game's boards.

Once players have built their decks, the game plays out on a series of boards (like Monopoly, Sorry, etc.). Players roll electronic dice to move along a series of spaces, and can acquire squares by dropping down monsters. When an opposing player lands on a space with a monster, he can opt to either fight it with a beast of his own, or pay a toll. Battles are handled on a separate screen, with each player's monster represented by a card that can be augmented to boost the creature's power.

Spaces on the game board correspond to different terrains and elements, and it's possible creatures will gain bonuses or suffer penalties depending on where they're dropped. The goal here is to acquire mana; a character wins this delicious mana by acquiring and holding spaces. The more properties a character has the more powerful he becomes; certain creatures and spells can only be used once a player has accumulated enough territory or mana. Further, players can improve the spaces they hold with

spells, sort of like the way building hotels on Baltic and Mediterranean Avenues turn those properties from dump to a slightly more impressive dump in Monopoly.

Players will be able to tackle a single-player mode that comes with a sweeping story involving a young boy and a queen who must battle to free their land from—a go figure—tyranny. This mode offers 3D cut-scenes with lots of talking heads, and Namco Bandai has cryptically mentioned the story comes from one of the "worlds' [sic] top sci-fi writers."

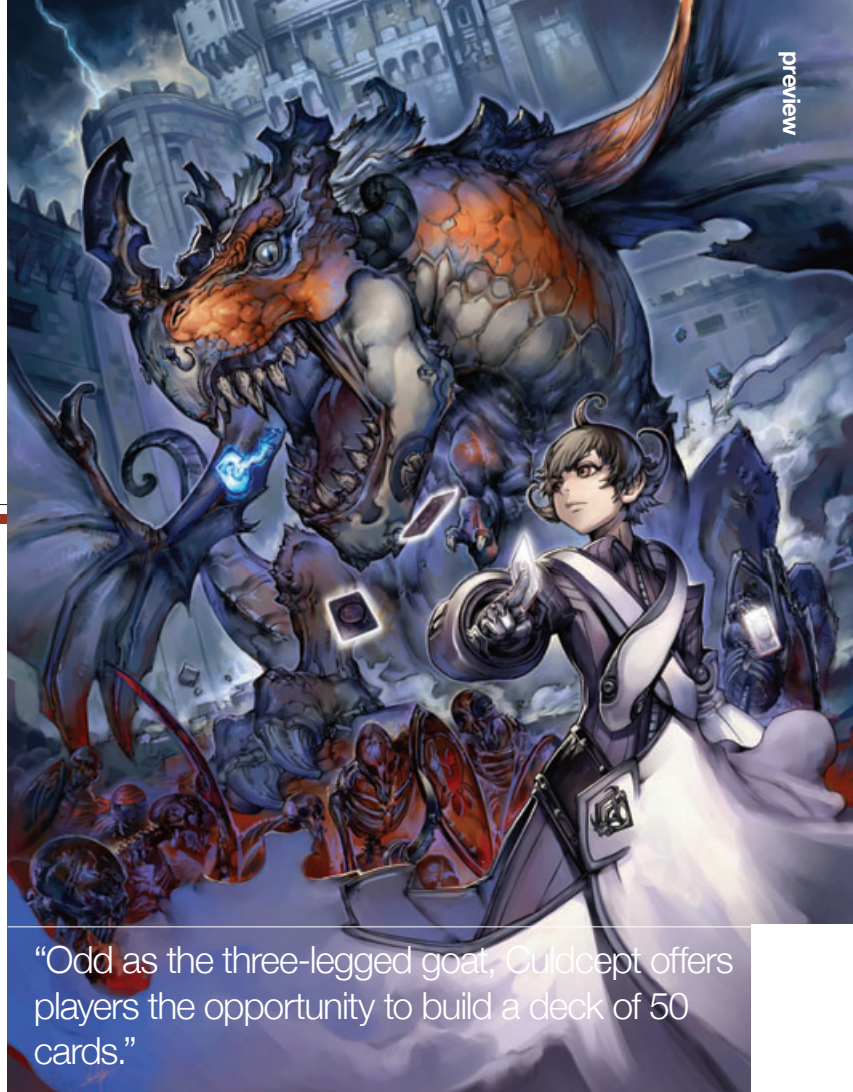
A multiplayer mode, one devoid of a story, is playable both online and off by up to four people. Cards acquired in the single-player adventure can be used for multiplayer matches, and the game will offer lots of options for players to customize their characters. Voice chat will be available via the Xbox 360 Live communicator headset and downloadable content, of course, is also on tap. Fans of the Culdcept series, which has versions released on Segas Saturn and Dreamcast and Sony's PlayStation 2, will note this is the first time the series offers online play.

And who knows? This may be the board (game) to beat the boredom...

Culdcept Saga

System(s)	Xbox 360
Developer	OmiyaSoft/Jamsworks
Publisher	Namco Bandai
Available	Fall

preview



"Odd as the three-legged goat, Culdcept offers players the opportunity to build a deck of 50 cards."



BioShock

Theatre of pain

words Brady Flechter

Standing in front of a small group of press at a swank hotel suite in Hollywood, BioShock creative director Ken Levine starts in with his inviting pitch on what makes his latest work tick. He speaks with the confidence and inflection of a creator who knows he's got something good. Real good. For gamers anxiously waiting to see just how good real good is, it's worth pointing out in the mean time that BioShock does enough right in the first level alone to fuel the anticipation that, indeed, this could be something truly great.

Levine has talked a lot about redefining the first-person shooter, recalling games like Half-Life 2 as a reference to beat. Now seemed like the time to ask: do you think BioShock will be *important*? His smart answer: that's up to you to decide.

Such a question doesn't get asked very often, or even should be, but all the details surrounding the game make it worth wondering. Of course, BioShock is a tailored genre game like everything else, and there is no doubt that the shooting in "first-person shooter" is firmly in place. I haven't been introduced to enough of the game to experience the promise of choice and consequence, but before possible evolutions in typical gameplay shows itself or not, at least the game already feels superb as a shooter. I immediately enjoyed the targeting and movement and control, engaged by the action and

design showcased in the first few hours. Perhaps this is a minor detail, but even the telekinesis power felt immediately right, removed from the awkward nature that I find in a lot of games that have similar abilities.

The underwater setting, tragic and beautiful, does not look like anything before it. Even if this was a hint of what's to come, the originality deserves massive credit. It's creepier and more active than I expected, communicating a tortured populace that left some serious destruction in its wake. Apparently the game will not shy away from graphic moments: in one scene, a Big Daddy approaches a screaming victim, crushing him against a wall and swinging the body through the safety glass you watch behind. If you choose to extract the Adam from a Little Sister through death, the look of painful terror might just get to you a bit. I certainly didn't have happy thoughts when I walked into the office of a crazed plastic surgeon to see the handy work of his perfect creation.

BioShock

System(s)	Xbox 360, PC
Developer	Irrational Games
Publisher	2K Games
Available	August 21

First impressions are everything.

"The underwater setting, tragic and beautiful, does not look like anything before it."



The Agency

We're usin' code names

words Brady Fiechter

If the World of Warcraft-led fantasy's starting to bore, perhaps it's time for some slick spy games in your MMO. That's right: no magic and dungeons and elves here, only globe trotting with hi-tech gear onboard to catch the prize. The action-heavy missions involve a lot of penetrating of impenetrable facilities, using plenty of your familiar spy-inspired equipment to get the job done. Coop and head-to-head are mixed into the central story structure, which underpins each area you travel to. As a spy or a mercenary, your player of choice gains experience within the success of a specific agency. A class system is being worked out as well, and with proper rank, all sorts of equipment tweaks can be made to meet your style of play. If you hone your skills high enough, you can create your own faction and have members join. Missions include everything from drug runs to brutal hits on the enemy...there's no good and bad, merely opposition. Could the PS3 and PC versions share any interconnectivity? Sony hasn't given any definitive information either way...



The Agency	
System(s)	PlayStation 3, PC
Developer	SOE Seattle
Publisher	SOE
Available	2008



Turok

Guess who's on the menu?

words Brady Fiechter

It's one thing to play a special-ops dude with special-ops weaponry going after bad guys with equally special-ops-like weaponry. It's an entirely different ballgame when you've got dinosaurs in on the action. One nifty component to Turok is that these dinosaurs aren't on anyone's side. You'll see them rip good guys apart, bad guys apart, and you apart, depending on who's unlucky enough to rustle up their ire. If you're clever, you can indirectly control the aggressive creatures to help with your dirty work. If you get taken down by one of them, a quick reaction with steady button presses might result in ripping into their

skull or slashing a throat to break free. Your knife is a valuable friend, enabling stealth kills as you slink through the thick brush of this inhospitable world of the future. A bow is also a good approach to silence; the enemy can be seen pulling out shot arrows if you're not quick or precise enough for a kill. As you make your way through the various caves, bases and volcanic ruins, time will pass from day to night. Allies will join your side at times, but you'll only be in command of your main character, who follows a fairly open path of progression.

Turok	
System(s)	PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC
Developer	Propaganda Games
Publisher	Touchstone
Available	Fall



play Staff "Round-up"



Dave Halverson
Editor in Chief

Favorite genres: Platformers, adventure, 2D action, racing, RPGs, sandbox
Now playing: Heavenly Sword, The Darkness, Lair, Monster Madness, Blue Dragon, Jeanne d'Arc, Transformers, Overlord, Ratatouille
Favorite RPGs all time: Fable, Odin Sphere

Dave can't seem to let go of the past or get enough of the future, causing a strange genetic abnormality to take place. Immune to the burden of sleep or adulthood E Storm plays games new and old, both console and handheld by day, and fades away into any number of strange Japanese cartoons by night leaving only time to write it all down and ponder the true meaning of the universe.



Nick Des Barres
Japan Editor

Favorite genres: RPGs, Action, Fighting
Now playing: Folklore, Zelda: Phantom Hourglass, Puffy no PSI I Love You
Favorite RPGs all time: Genso Suikoden II, AZEL: Panzer Dragoon RPG

Nick fondly remembers the first video game he ever played: Trojan, by Capcom, on the NES. He wishes he could claim even earlier gaming-roots, and the modern-day Nick would probably be affronted by the reference to "Trojan" and insist it be called "Tatakai No Banka (Elegy For Battle)", but the fact remains that he's been playing games daily for nearly twenty years and writing about them for twelve. He tends to gravitate towards the classic genres of his youth: RPGs, action/adventure, shooting.

Dynasty Warriors Gundam 059
Project Sylpheed 060
Persona 3 062
Lair 064
The Darkness 066
Vampire Rain 067
Ratatouille 068
Fantastic Four: Rise 068
Dynasty Warriors DS 069



Brady Fiechter
Executive Editor

Favorite genres: Adventure, first-person shooters, action, RPGs
Now playing: Call of Juarez, Calling All Cars, The Darkness, Pac-Man CE
Favorite RPGs all time: Chrono Trigger, Final Fantasy IX

Under constant pressure by a friend to flee the country and study the ways of the Taoist, Brady continues to balk, proclaiming that his spiritual journey lies in movies and games. He finds joyful satisfaction in killing things, namely zombies and soldiers and evil creatures, which tend to pop up in some of his favorite genres.



Casey Loe
Contributing Editor

Favorite genres: RPGs, action, hummingbird simulators
Now playing: Lair, Eternal Sonata
Favorite RPGs all time: Phantasy Star II, Grandia

Casey had a promising future as a video game journalist a decade ago, but booze, pills, and his all-consuming hatred of Final Fantasy VIII ultimately left him incomprehensible and unemployable. After spending eight years on the street ranting about Squall Leonhart to winos, schizophrenics, and syphilitic prostitutes, Casey has tricked an old friend into paying him to complain about video games in a national video game magazine.

Dragoneer's Aria 069
Jeanne d'Arc 070
Heroes of Mana 072
Brave Story 072



Greg Orlando
Senior Editor

Favorite genres: RPGs, action, adventure, fighting, wrestling
Now playing: Dead Rising, Smash, Tennis
Favorite RPGs all time: Fable, Knights of the Old Republic

Of Greg Orlando, historians agree that he is, without question, the finest human being to be mentioned in this sentence. A veteran of the Cola Wars thrice decorated, Orlando understands the universe's great solitary truth: If the mule don't kick, you know the mule don't ride. He is currently missing, presumed pantsless...



Eric Patterson
Contributing Editor

Favorite genres: Survival Horror, puzzle, music + Bemani, 2D SNK fighters
Now playing: Pac-Man: CE, Persona 3 ("coughadtdobelwocough") **Favorite RPGs all time:** Phantasy Star, FFXII

Eric's reason for over two decades of video gaming is simple: so far, real life has yet to provide him access to zombies, quiet resort towns overrun with demons, ghosts you can trap with a camera, or, you know, a flesh and blood Jill Valentine or Ashley Graham. Mind getting on that, real life?

Reviews

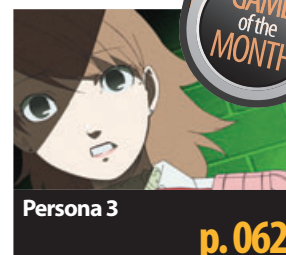
August 2007



Mike Griffin
PC Editor

Favorite genres: MMORPGs, first-person shooters, action-adventure
Now playing: Lost Planet, Shadowrun, Granado Espada **Favorite RPGs all time:** Phantasy Star, FFXII

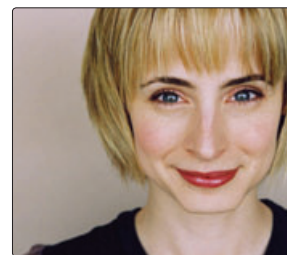
Even as a wee lad playing Zaxxon on Coleco, the technology and artistry of game design has always fascinated Mike. He thinks some games are timeless in that respect, whether 2D, 3D, flat-shaded or bump mapped. Mike's goal is to equip the readers with accurate information, so that limited funds and time can be put to good use.



Persona 3
p. 062

The play rating system

- 10...Perfect
- 9...Extraordinary
- 8...Great
- 7...Good
- 6...Decent
- 5...Average
- 4...Below average
- 3...Poor
- 2...Bad
- 1...Terrible



Heather Campbell
Associate Editor

Favorite genres: Fighting, RPGs, Action, Etc.
Now playing: Eternal Sonata, Heros of Mana, Settlers of Catan **Favorite RPGs all time:** Final Fantasy VIII, Final Fantasy XII

Heather's favorite game would be a hybrid of Street Fighter III and MMORPG level grinding. If someone would craft a title that was endless hours of fighting the same enemies, using classic Capcom button combos, then her death in front of the arcade cabinet would become the stuff of urban legend. Heathers been playing since Aztec Adventure, and still has nightmares about Missile Defence 3-D.



Mike Hobbs
Art Director

Favorite genres: Action, racing, adventure, alternative, shooters
Now playing: Super Stardust HD
Favorite RPGs all time: Super Mario RPG, Phantasy Star

A gamer since Space Invaders, Michael has a soft spot for 2D shooters and other games that directly engage the player. Nintendo certainly ranks high on his list of ideal developers. He's also recently become addicted to RC sailplane flying, so you'll actually find him outside now, absorbing the sun's photons.

DYNASTY WARRIORS GUNDAM

A good Gundam game? When did they start making those?

words Nick Des Barres

Gundam fans! The time for sweet redemption is at hand: you're about to play the best action game the license has ever seen. After long years languishing within Bandai's internal studios, the company recently had the foresight to open the property up to outside developers, resulting in fine collaborations with Capcom and Namco. It is Koei's effort that shines brightest, however, thanks in equal parts to next-gen hardware, the largest collection of characters and Mobile Suits ever assembled in any Gundam title released stateside, and the same tried-and-true gameplay engine Koei has been effectively recycling ever since Dynasty Warriors 2.

The game bears perhaps one of the most accurate and descriptive titles of all time—Dynasty Warriors: Gundam is Dynasty Warriors with Gundams. It's pretty simple—if you're not into either, you won't like this game. If you're a fan of one of the two, you'll have a good time. But if you lust for *both*...oh dear, oh heavens, watch out, barricade the doors, call the Light Brigade, put some shrimp on the barbie...it's going to be a banner day.

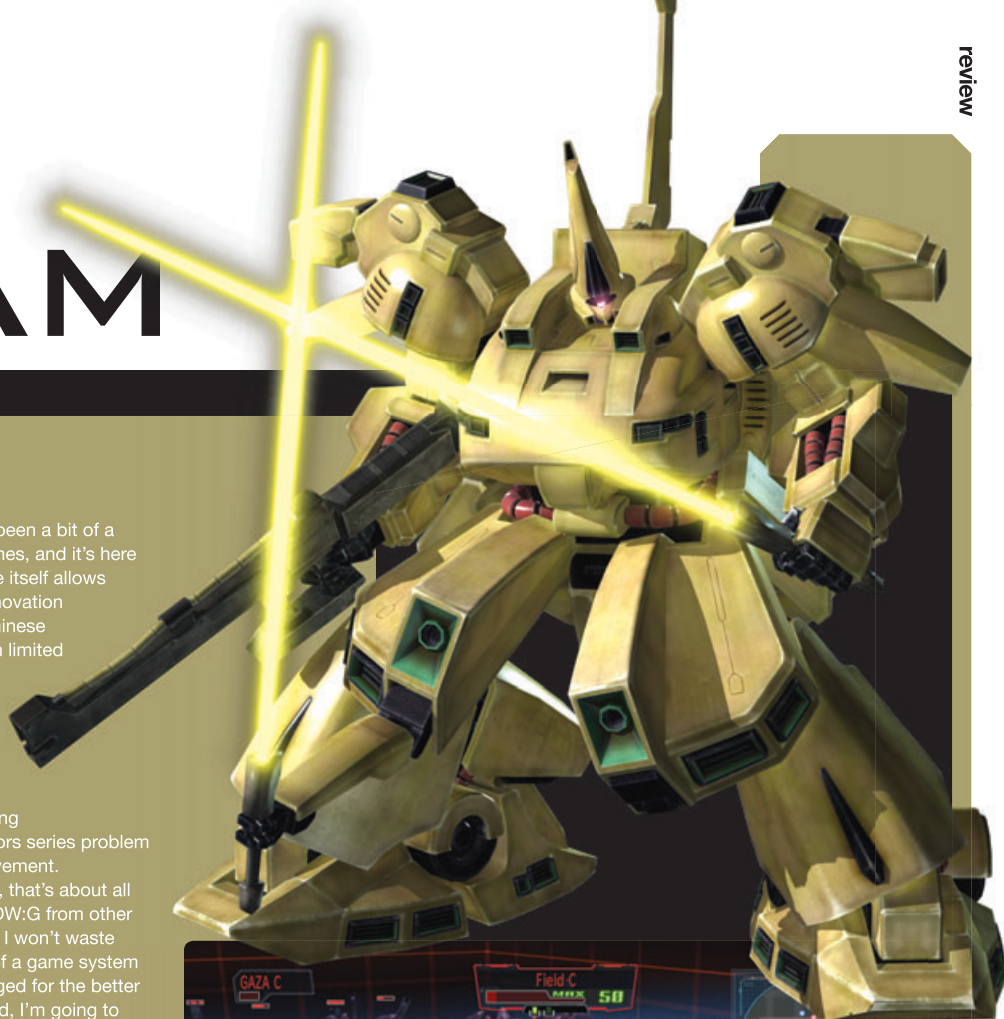
Structurally, DW:G is identical to every other game in the Warriors meta-series. I like to think of the gameplay in Omega-Force's slashfests as an action-lite wrapper surrounding a giant RTS: The meat is tap-tap combo strings and cutting down swaths of (nearly immobile) enemies, but the *bones* are taking and re-taking territory, protecting allies, and keeping the flow of battle across the entire map under tight reins.

That last bit—keeping your war under control by controlling a single

character—has always been a bit of a chore in the Warrior games, and it's here that the Gundam license itself allows for a bit of gameplay innovation to remedy it. Ancient Chinese generals may have been limited to bipedal locomotion, but Mobile Suits got them some *boost thrusters*, yo. In DW:G, you can whip around the map at breakneck speeds, effectively solving the long-standing Warriors series problem of insufferably slow movement.

In terms of gameplay, that's about all there is to differentiate DW:G from other Warriors series titles, so I won't waste your time with a recap of a game system that's remained unchanged for the better part of a decade. Instead, I'm going to tell you why, should you happen to take your Gundam seriously, this game might warrant the purchase of a \$599 machine just to play it. Imagine all your favorite characters and their respective Mobile Suits from First Gundam, Z, ZZ, G, Wing and Turn A. It sounds like hyperbole from the back of the box, but hey, it's the truth—entwining in fully-voiced scenarios even the most manic Gundam otaku could not possibly conceive of. It's a big-budget, well-written fanfic, with Amuro and Char fighting as allies, and Domon and Heero trading quips. The most incredible thing about it is the sheer breadth of content: There are *lengthy* story modes for all sixteen (!) playable characters, and if you want to experience them all you'll be looking at a solid fifty hours of play.

Visually the game is not a marvel (though it acquits itself far, far better than, say, Gundam: Crossfire), and though its classic Warriors gameplay is as solid as a rock, it's certainly nothing groundbreaking. What is remarkable here is as perfect a use of a character license as gaming has



“Gundam fans! The time for sweet redemption is at hand: you're about to play the best action game the license has ever seen.”

ever seen, bringing every Gundam otaku's most heady, fannish daydreams to next-gen life. I'll say it again: If you like Warriors games, here's another great one. If you're a well-versed Gundam fan, the closest thing yet to a dream game has arrived.

Dynasty Warriors:
Gundam

Score **8.0**

+ Incredibly replay value, stories are a Gundam fan's wet dream

– Repetitive gameplay, bland graphics

System(s) PlayStation 3

Developer Omega-Force

Publisher Koei/Namco-Bandai

Online/Multi NA

Available August 27

ESRB Rating Teen

Dynasty Warriors: Gundam isn't entirely a single-player affair. Go at it one-on-one, duel style, or play the story modes co-op.





PROJECT SYLPHEED

Shoot to thrill

words Dave Halverson

Early buzz on Sylpheed has been less than deafening due in part to a lackluster demo that never should have seen the light of day and the nonexistent shooter market, which it will hopefully help to rebuild. Do I mean to say that Sylpheed is so outstanding that it may rejuvenate the genre? Not likely.

It's a great shooter and then some but the genre itself, I'm afraid, will never again regain its hold on the industry. So let's enjoy this latest incarnation from GameArts and Seta, which takes the series off its rails, setting us free in massive sorties filled with the most emblazoned solar skies to ever grace a console.

Sylpheed Project isn't a shooter you blow

through in an afternoon. It's a chain-of-events mission-based space opera with all the trappings of Mobile Suit Gundam volume. There's real emotion at the core...friends die and are pulled apart as humanity takes its turf war to the cosmos after terraforming the stars. The CG is beautiful, the voice acting uncommonly good and the music unbelievably on par

with the Sega CD original. Initially appalled that Sylpheed was pulled off of its rails, now I can't imagine it any other way. This is a shooter evolved, from the hangar to the missions themselves. Initially you'll find yourself primarily locking onto far away bogies in traditional dogfights, but those orange reticules will soon make way to gigantic battleships, yours to incinerate as your comrades and the enemy swarm all around you. Missions are long and usually divided into 3 to 4 segments that also serve as checkpoint saves (so you never have to replay completed sections) and you can return to the mothership to resupply at anytime, which I believe is a first. If you like it interactive, radio contact is almost constant as your commanding officer and wingmen feed you intelligence, or you can go by instinct—which I don't recommend after the first three missions. You may find yourself trying to down five destroyers in three minutes when nailing a single target would get the job done...ahem.

The action itself—dogfighting with all the trimmings—rides on a weapons system of your own design, spending earned points to develop your nose gun and up to three main weapon systems (all of which can be assigned to your button of choice) as you see fit, and proper deployment makes all



Behold Sylpheed's very special effects.



“There’s real emotion at the core...friends die and are pulled apart as humanity takes its turf war to the cosmos after terraforming the stars.”



the difference. The weapons systems in PS are tethered tautly to each mission and each upgrade changes the appearance of your fighter. Where weapons systems are often mere window dressing, in PS they’re often the difference between success and failure.

Every facet of the game has been finely tuned and polished, especially the graphics. We’ve come a very long way since the pre-rendered flat-shaded polygons of the Sega CD original. Project Sylpheed is drenched in real-time space constructs, from massive space fortresses to dwarfing battleships that feature intricately modeled turrets, laser bursts and exhaust; and do they ever explode in a hail of glory. This is by far the prettiest free-roaming shooter ever created. The atmosphere above Earth is especially

Deep space has never looked so beautiful.

breathhtaking.

So, is this the evolution of the shooter on console? In a way, yes, given the age of the 2-3 hour game is behind us, however, I can’t say whether or not I’d rather have a similar 8-10 hour long game on rails with more of an emphasis on normal mapping, reflective surfaces and massive HD bosses...because they haven’t (and probably never will) make one. In the meantime, I’m supremely grateful to all involved for bringing the space shooter back around, especially one of this caliber and duration. GameArts set the bar with Sylpheed on Sega CD; it’s only fitting that they set it once more for a new generation.

Project Sylpheed

score **8.5**

- + A long, cinematic, open shooter bathed in stunning visuals with a great soundtrack and weapons system. Nice to see a difficulty setting again too.
- Although it’s gorgeous overall, normal mapped and/or reflective surfaces are sparse. Certain missions are somewhat vague, leading to a few bouts of trial and error.

System(s)	Xbox 360
Developer	GameArts/Seta
Publisher	Microsoft/Square Enix
Online/Multi	Xbox Live Aware
ESRB Rating	Teen
Available	July 10

Shin Megami Tensei Persona 3

I had heard Japanese schools were tough, but geez...

words Eric L. Patterson

during a recent phone conversation, Dave asked me how I was liking Persona 3. After a brief moment of thought, I summed up all the feelings I had for the game in one simple sentence: "It has changed the way I think about RPGs."

If you don't know much about Persona 3, that statement might not make a lot of sense. What's so special about this game? Why does it deserve such a score? The reason Persona 3 has forced me to reconsider what I want from an RPG is because, more than almost any other title I can remember playing in recent or distant history, it gets it.

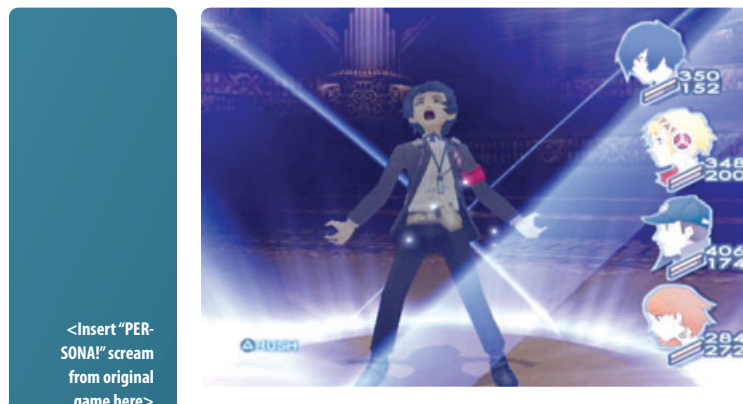
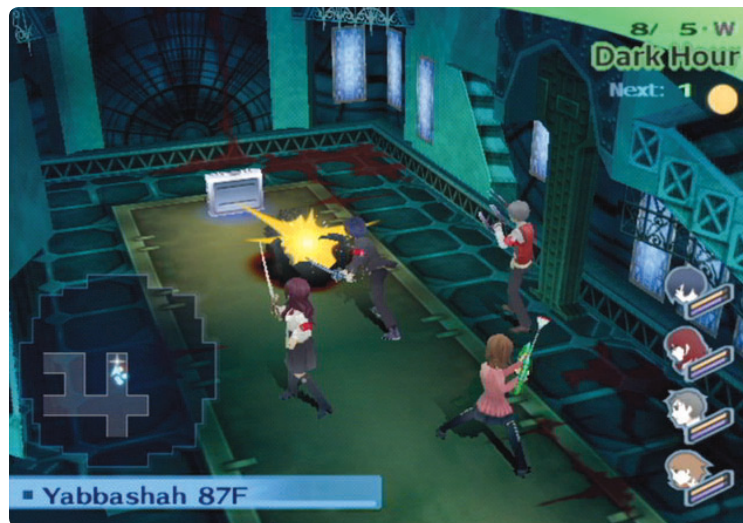
How many locations can you name from the last RPG you played? How many of the people that you met along the way can you remember? Who were they? What did they do? Why did they exist? Hell, how much could you even tell me about the characters that were in your own party, the people who followed you around for the entire game?

That, my dear reader, is what Persona 3 understands. Unlike so many other RPGs that have come out throughout the years, here we are set down in the middle of an imaginary world, filled with people and places and events and experiences, and then we're encouraged to not just play the game, but *honestly care*. The characters you'll be introduced to aren't simply tools used by the developer to convey information to the player, they're

people with lives and problems to meet, get to know, and hopefully befriend. The game's locations—from Gekkoukan High to Paulownia Mall—aren't brief stops that you'll visit for five minutes and then never see again, but pieces of a larger city that you'll come to know and love. All this is created by the Social Link system, which initially tricks you into thinking it is little more than a gimmick used for expanding your character's abilities. What you then come to learn is that more importantly, it is the key through which you'll unlock the world that Persona 3 has to offer, one small yet engrossing piece at a time.

As much enjoyment as there is from living the life of a high school student, fear not: Persona 3 hasn't forgotten its roots. There are still ample amounts of knock-down, drag-out warfare with the evil Shadows and their masters, and surviving those battles will still come from a healthy dose of character leveling and a whole mess of Persona creation. Perhaps in an attempt to make the game a wee bit friendlier to the more casual non-Megaten folks out there, how much (or how little) time you spend ascending the randomly-generated floors of Tartarus is often left up to you. Want to go hardcore in your role as a demon slayer? Have fun. Want to spend more time enjoying the less dangerous aspects of the game, and only focus on the required storyline-centered boss fights? Go right ahead.

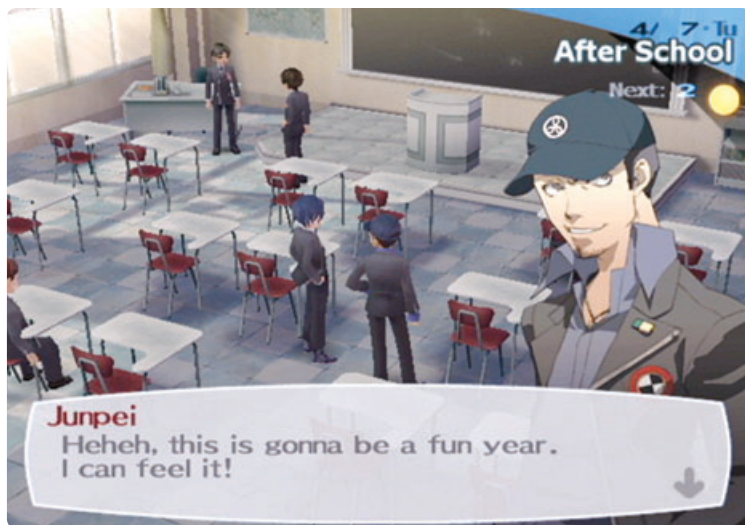
No matter how you decide to spend your time, the balance between these



3

Seriously... why isn't this a TV series or something?

"...we are set down in the middle of an imaginary world, filled with people and places and events and experiences, and then we're encouraged to not just play the game, but *honestly care.*"



two very different halves is always harmonious. A few people, in an attempt to find some way to classify the game, have explained Persona 3 as "a dating sim meets a dungeon crawler." Sure, okay, that kind of works. Well, except that it does a huge disservice to the Social Link system—this is not just a shallow game of skirt-chasing—nor does it give Atlus the credit they deserve for how well they were able to pack two seemingly incompatible game genres together into one so cleverly designed package. A package, by the way, that is then wrapped in an audio and visual style as unique as the gameplay itself, decorated lovingly with an utterly fantastic soundtrack, great English voice acting, and animated cut-scenes so good that it is downright criminal that Atlus has not expanded them into a full anime series.

If Persona 3 has one flaw, it is the point at which the harsh realization sets in that this game is too ambitious for its own good. Mediocre games are tolerated, good games are enjoyed, but great games make us almost fearful to keep playing, because the more we do, the closer we get to their end. Every moment I spent interacting with the game's characters was cherished, but one after

another, the extent of those experiences was reached. I can't blame Persona 3 for not being more than it set out to be; I instead blame the game for now making me want a Persona 4 that would probably be financially (and logistically) impossible for Atlus to produce.

Games like Persona 3 are the reason we play games. So, I can't say this enough: play it.

Shin Megami Tensei: Persona 3

score **9.5**

- + An amazing experience that reminds you of why you fall in love with games.
- I swear, Atlus... if I don't get FES, I'll die.

System(s)	PlayStation 2
Developer	Atlus
Publisher	Atlus
Online/Multi	1
Available	July 24, 2007
ESRB Rating	Mature

m

an, things would have been a whole lot different if the PlayStation 3 had launched with a title like *Lair*. It would have given the platform a

store demo that could have actually lured eyes away from *Gears of War*. It might have lead to the Sixaxis not being completely ignored as the mainstream media drooled all over the Wiimote. And far fewer gamers would have responded to Sony's overblown claims about the power of the Cell CPU with derisive snorts and faux jerk-off motions. But, alas, games this pretty take time to make.

So yes, if there's any doubt left, *Lair* has come together beautifully. All the framerate issues and such are gone, and any fears that the game would be on rails or that the motion controls would suck have been thoroughly allayed. In fact, with its stunning visuals and incredible soundtrack, *Lair* may well be the single most powerful experience that a man can share with his \$5,000 home theatre system.

"...*Lair* may well be the single most powerful experience that a man can share with his \$5,000 home theatre system."

Actually, *Lair* even looks pretty good on crappy old SD TVs. That's because so much of its impact comes from its breathtaking panoramas, in which you can see miles upon miles of game terrain and soar towards specs in the distance that smoothly transforms into richly detailed cities, canyons, and waterways. And it certainly doesn't hurt that everywhere it takes you is a place you'd love to visit. *Lair*'s imaginative settings rival those created for the *Lord of the Rings* movies, and there's way more of them than you'd expect—each of the 14 missions is set in a completely different part of *Lair*'s world. Just about everything else in *Lair* looks conspicuously great too—the smoke trails, the water effects, the dragon models and animations, and the pre-rendered CG scenes are all top-notch. *Lair* is an utter feast for the eyes.

Lair

Blu (Ray) Dragon

words Casey Loe

And it's no less a feast for your ears. Academy Award-nominated composer John Debney used his dumptruck full of Sony money to hire an orchestra and diligently scored 50-plus tracks that perfectly match the ebb and flow of the game's ever-shifting missions. *Lair*'s early chapters have a traditional, percussion-heavy battlefield soundtrack, but as the game explores new lands and new mission structures, they give way to exotic instruments and tribal chants. It all sounds great in the game's unlockable concert hall (where you can listen to hours of the original uncompressed recordings), but it's even better in the game, where the environments, mission objectives and soundtrack merge to create some intensely memorable experiences. If gliding over a beautiful starlit ocean to the haunting strains of opera doesn't impress you, you're dead inside.

Unfortunately, some of *Lair*'s cinematic beauty comes at the expense of playability, and while the game earns 10s in the fields of graphics and sound, I'd give its clarity of experience a 2. It's difficult to tell what's going on at any given moment, thanks

in part to the fact that all dragons, good or evil, look basically identical (you can press down on the control pad to outline your enemies in red, but you can't fight in that mode). And in a game that forces you to keep track of mid-air, surface, and aquatic battlefields all at once, the lack of any on-screen map or radar is frustrating. I understand that giving a dragon radar would seem a little silly, but it's nearly a necessity in this sort of game. Instead, you get an assortment of inadequate navigation aids, including an on-screen arrow that points in the general direction of your main objective, a bunch of wingmen who repeatedly bark out contradictory instructions ("Get down there and take out those guns!" "Fly up here and kill these dragons!") and dozens of completely unnecessary cut scenes that confuse and disorient you by interrupting the action to show ships sinking or new enemies appearing, or whatever, with no geographical context. Put it all together, and it's easily the most infuriating navigation system since *Sega Rally*'s disembodied voice inexplicably demanded that players



We've come a long way since Dragon Spirit.

make a "VERY... LONG... EASY... RIGHT... MAYBE."

The confusion is compounded by the fact that Factor 5 seems to have thrown in every single idea from their initial brainstorming session, creating a weird hybrid of genres that changes frantically from second to second. First you're firing volleys of fireballs at distant targets. Now you're on the ground massacring a battalion of troops. Now you're side-ramming some chump in a mid-air dogfight. Now you're exchanging bites and claw swipes with another dragon in a hand-to-hand duel. Now it's some sort of crazy QTE where you've leapt onto some other guy's dragon! Now you're making a bombing run! Now you're having a brain aneurysm from experiencing 6 different combat systems in 45 seconds of gameplay!

But let's be perfectly clear—all those ideas are actually pretty good, and once you figure out what the hell is going on in Lair's frenetic early missions, a truly enjoyable game will emerge from the chaos. In fact, much of Lair's confusion stems from its depth—instead of settling into a typical shooter rut, it constantly throws new concepts, enemies and objectives at you. And the game improves immeasurably in later levels, where players are given the freedom to apply the many tactics they've learned to open-ended objectives.

It took me a while to mesh with Lair's weird wavelength, but the more I played it, the more I learned to love it. And there's quite a bit to love, too—you could probably rush through all the missions in a weekend, but there's endless fun to be had replaying old missions to earn higher ranks. Those who do will unlock tons of great stuff, including additional dragons, new moves, two hours of original orchestral soundtrack recordings, making-of clips, production sketches, and an entire in-game audio commentary. Don't assume that because Lair is such a stunning piece of eye candy that there's isn't also a substantial game at its core.

Lair

score **9.0**

- + A new high-water mark for next-gen graphics and sound
- Confusing navigation and poorly explained objectives

System(s)	PlayStation 3
Developer	Factor 5
Publisher	SCEA
Multi	None
ESRB Rating	Pending
Available	August 14

The Darkness

Out from the shadows

words Brady Fiechter

One of the final shootouts in *The Darkness* takes place in a humble east-side apartment in New York. Cars pull up on all sides of the building, mafia cronies spilling into the streets as they spray gunfire through shattered windows. From inside you dart from room to room, frantically ensuring that the body counts remain exclusively outside. A television broadcasts an old western in the living room as your auntie fires off a handgun in the kitchen.

I love it when I feel like a game has shown me something new! It's a fantastically engaging scene in a game that's filled with them, intensified by bold atmosphere and visual design. *The Darkness* works on so many levels that go beyond the norm. If you're a player who is more concerned with that new gun or that new technique or that new move, *The Darkness* will not hold you as firmly in its devious grip. There are first-person shooters out there with stronger gameplay ideas and tighter execution, but what really makes this experience special is its ability to draw you into the shadowy, seductive motions of its world through so many techniques that supplant traditional, core mechanics. Sometimes developer Starbreeze misses the mark, caught up in misguided ambitions—the startling tonal shift midway through doesn't work like it could have—but when they nail it, *The Darkness* is quite extraordinary.

The action is at its best in tighter, more

"I love it when I feel like a game has shown me something new."

claustrophobic situations. The portrayal of brutality and chaos climaxes to an unsettling degree toward the end, when masses of the fallen beg for their lives before your hungry darkness tentacles devour their hearts—a graphic and empowering choice throughout the game that enhances supernatural abilities. Darklings deliciously do their part, kamikazeing, machine-gunning and slashing away at the enemy, playfully declaring condolences to the family, or maybe raising a leg and taking a piss on the body. Whether appealing or appalling, *The Darkness* is not afraid to get a little nasty.

It's not just the imagery that's intense. Gritty and authentic, the sharply drawn characters command attention. You could call the mafia stage a bit hackneyed, but here again, it's the presentation around it all that makes the journey convincing and raw. It was a nice surprise to get so wrapped up in the plight of my character's tortured psyche, even if the ending leaves the hints of something much more on the table.

The Darkness is deceptively accom-



Spectacular lighting and shadows bring each interior to life.

plished, succeeding in areas that deserve high praise and further exploration. It makes choices that you may not give notice to, or may, like me, find intoxicating. Admire the detail and imagination of the intimate, cleverly unfolding New York setting—the art on the walls, the scripture in the burned out orphanage, the music in the subway hub that evokes a dreamy spirit.

The pacing, the instinctive separation of quiet moments and narrative and blood-pumping killing, can often be subjective to enjoyment, but it's this personal experience we find in our favorite games. Like with *Riddick* before it, Starbreeze has made another one of those great favorites.

The Darkness

score 9.0

+ High praise to the voice acting. The mixture of adventure and shooter and narrative is spot on. The stylized aesthetic looks so good.

- Occasionally shaky execution of some big ideas. Disappointing payoff.

System(s) PS3, Xbox 360

Developer Starbreeze

Publisher 2K Games

Online/Multi 1-16 player

Available June 25

ESRB Rating Mature



Vampire Rain

The forecast looks bloody

words Brady Flechter

John Lloyd and his team of special-ops vampire killers are told they should be happy it's raining all the time, because the creatures of the night roaming the city streets won't be as sensitive to human scent. I'd hate to see how wickedly perceptive these enemies might be if the night air were dry (and by the end of the game, invited that prospect and its much-needed contrast). The first few hours of Vampire Rain are tough, ensuring that you realize this is a game of uncompromising stealth. If there's even a question you could be spotted, well, then you're spotted, and whoever is about to rip into your flesh will do so with a tenacity and speed the likes of which you may never have seen in a video game. These wildly aggressive vampires known as Night Walkers pursue with the speed of cheetah, able to leap to the top of high rises and disappear as quickly as they came. One of the cool aspects of the game is turning a corner and catching a pair of them eerily flash by.

Vampire Rain begins with your character futilely armed with a handgun and machine gun, forcing you to go into complete avoidance mode until a few other weapons are introduced later on, such as the satisfying sniper

rifle. Until you're able to pull off the necessary one-hit kills, confrontation is simply out of the question. Nothing wrong with a pure stealth experience; the problem here, which follows Vampire Rain to its end, is the disarming choice to create levels that are open to exploration yet only provide one very rigid path to the enemy. You have to really play by the game's inconsistent rule set to enjoy its successful qualities, yet it's consistently dulling to see those rules playing out like a game stuck too far in the past.

It doesn't help matters that the missions are fairly mundane and mechanical. There's a lot of climbing, jumping, shimmying and sneaking around that can be engaging in a rudimentary manner; the game is tight. I like that it isn't as meticulous as Splinter Cell—a game that was conspicuously aped for inspiration—it's just too bad the presentation and vision aren't there to solidify the experience for more than it is.



Vampire Rain

score 6.0

- + Vampires make lovely game villains.
- The dialogue and voice acting could be called campy, but that would be stretching it

System(s)	Xbox 360
Developer	Artoon
Publisher	Microsoft
Online/Multi	1-8 players
ESRB Rating	M
Available	July



Pop goes the vampire's head!



Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer

score 4.5

So not fantastic

words Dave Halverson

System(s)	PS2, PS3, Xbox 360, Wii	Multi	4 player co-op
Developer	Seven Studios	Available	Now
Publisher	2K	ESRB Rating	Teen

As game and movie continue to intertwine, a clear picture is forming separating the great, the good, and the ugly. King Kong, The Incredibles, Ratatouille, The Chronicles of Riddick, TMNT, KOTOR, The Nightmare Before Christmas: Oogie's Revenge, T3: Rise of the Machines, the upcoming Transformers game and so on represent the best that movie gaming has to offer—worlds apart from such utter drivel as The Fantastic Four, Pirates of the Caribbean: The Legend of Jack Sparrow, and Batman: Dark Tomorrow. In between you'll find a sea of good to mediocre fare including various Harry Potter, Shrek, Spider-Man, Pirates of the Caribbean, and Star Wars games together with oddities like Minority Report. At first glance

Rise would appear to fall directly into the movie-game cesspool. Its lackluster by-the-numbers gameplay is compounded by the Four's awkward stances, limited animation schemes, lame grunts and god-awful feel. Sticking with it, however, some decent ideas do fight there way to the surface only to be extinguished in the execution. The atypical 4-player toggle fest can work, as evidenced by Marvel Ultimate Alliance, but here it's mired in so many on-screen prompts that any value is sapped before you get to think, in between bouts of subpar brawling and poorly executed

"some decent ideas do fight there way to the surface..."

Some Thing has gone awry.



Ratatouille

score 8.0

I smell a rat

words Dave Halverson

System(s)	PS2, GC, Wii, Xbox 360 (reviewed)	Multi	None
Developer	Heavy Iron Studios	Available	Now
Publisher	THQ	ESRB Rating	E

As a rule, if it says Heavy Iron on the case, whatever is inside, even if it's a game about talking rats, is pure gold. What they did for Scooby Doo, SpongeBob, and The Incredibles they've taken to the next level with Ratatouille, opting this time for an open-world/mission-based adventure that combines crazy chases, platforming galore, action-puzzle tactics, combat, and just about any other play mechanic you can think of in a big, beautiful rat stew. The secret is in the details, such as the way they approach tight-rope balancing, the way Remy feels and interacts with his environment, and the HD coating they've generously applied to the Xbox 360 version. Unlike so many rezzed-up ports, the 360 game features normal mapping, real-

istic rat fuzz, gorgeous water, reflections, higher poly models and other HD accoutrements that set it apart from the Wii and PS2 games, which both make the most of their respective platforms, although I have zero interest. Pity THQ doesn't send out review code. We'd have given Ratatouille the red-carpet treatment, but instead find ourselves a month post-release with our print review. If you passed on it and desire the occasional toon epic, it's worth a trip back to your local game emporium.



The secret is in the details."

Remy finds himself on the run quite often.

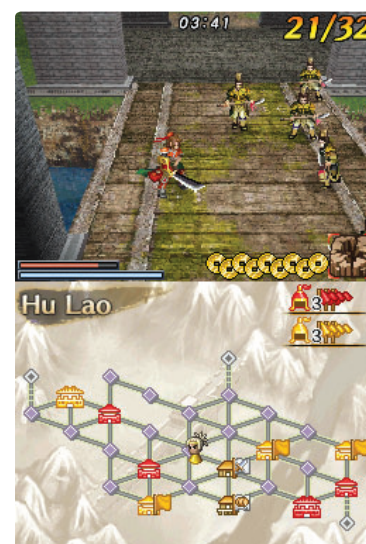


Dynasty Warriors DS: Fighter's Battle

score 6.5

System(s)	DS	Multi	NA
Developer	Koei	Available	July 24
Publisher	Koei	ESRB Rating	Pending

dynasty Warriors DS shows all the earmarks of being a well-developed hack-n-slash fighter, but there's something so soulless about destroying hundreds of identical sprites on a mud-colored field. After my hundredth enemy, it hit me that the game felt depressing. I wasn't expecting variation from a Dynasty Warriors title, but seeing the game reduced to such simple graphics clarifies the repetitiveness of the combat in DW titles. The play works like this. Choose your hero from a set of three new fighters. Check. You've got a set of bases that you defend using a Battle Deck—cards that represent famous Dynasty Warriors brawlers. Select a card for each base, and then run out and attack the hordes of young, optimistic recruits from the other side. Unite a divided land with your magic skills that you



select from your Battle Deck! Sure, Koei calls it the "Obstacle Roulette System," but we know it as "Fancy Name for How You Fight." It's novel to see a mini version of a game that I first played when the PS2 launched, but unless you're really into Dynasty Warriors titles, this isn't going to be a game you'll get, nor is it a flagship DW title to get you into the genre. **Heather Campbell**

"It's novel to see a mini version of a game that I first played when the PS2 launched..."

Dragoneer's Aria

score 8.5

System(s)	PSP	Multi	None
Developer	Hitmaker	Available	August 21
Publisher	NIS	ESRB Rating	RP

now, this is a delightful surprise. Nevermind that Nipponichi seems to have cribbed so much of Square-Enix's style; this is exactly the hardcore RPG I've been waiting to toss into my PSP on long flights to Moscow. See, I'm a sucker for effeminate male protagonists and long, lonely runs through cricket-infested forests. If I'm going to spend 40 hours exploring another world, I want that place to be beautiful, forlorn, and snug all at the same time. There's so much to do, and so much depth in this game. Individual stats are raised independent of level, and can be affected by choices in armor and armor-junctioned spheres. Recipes are used to develop potions and new pieces of weaponry, so though you have money (as all monsters carry cash), you can fashion your upgrades on the fly. This is a game for those who love numbers, pieces, and parts. And it's dubbed in Japanese or English, per your preference. The story is standard stuff, which is

"There's so much to do, and so much depth in this game."



one of few disappointments. Young hero trains for years to become a dragoon, but on his coronation day, a mythic black dragon destroys much of his known world. Rise, boy, to the heavens as a legend! As a side note: This is the single ugliest font I've ever seen on a title screen. Don't worry; the game itself is elegant and deep. **Heather Campbell**

Mary switched to Guard Stance? Oh, it's on.

Jeanne d'Arc

French bred

words Dave Halverson

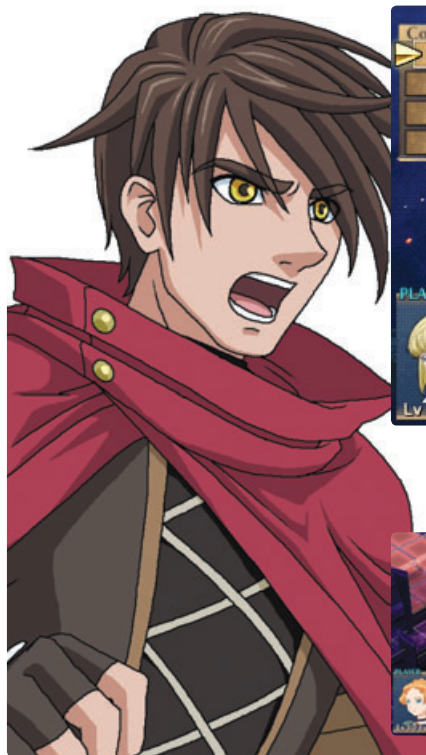
“...when the creators of Dark Cloud, Rogue Galaxy, and Dragon Quest VIII throw their chapeau into the ring you best take notice.”

although strategy RPG players have their druthers these days—never thought I'd say that actually—when the creators of Dark Cloud, Rogue Galaxy, and Dragon Quest VIII throw their chapeau into the ring you best take notice. Believe me, they give you ample cause.

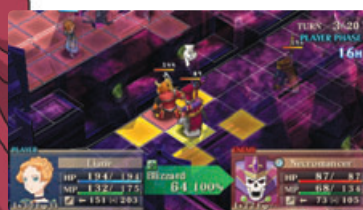
While a fantasy play on Joan of Arc may seem unsavory to a select few (bloody English), I assure you it is every bit as compelling as the original tale, if not more so, by way of the astonishing anime that frames the adventure and creature designs the likes that we have seldom seen on the PSP. Although Level-5

has done plenty genre-wise to make it their own, the last thing that I expected was a painstakingly animated and voiced onboard anime. The press materials make mention of it but not nearly to the degree it deserves. Produced by none other than Production IG, it should be heralded as one of the game's main selling points.

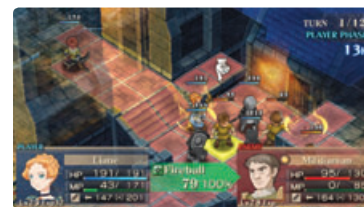
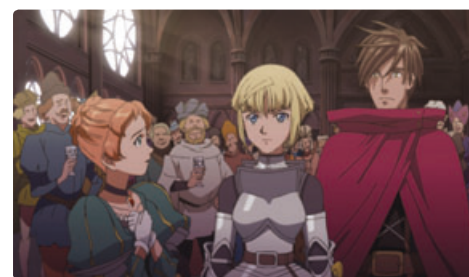
Focusing on the gameplay, it's the little things that count. On the battlefield the in-game instructions resemble clever recipe cards adorned with visual aids and vivacious text boxes, explaining all of the cool little do-dads that Level-5 has brought to the feast, such as combining skills to inflict powerful attacks, weapon-endemic abilities for each character (from a posse



An inferno of strategy role playing power!



"This looks more like a triple-A PS2 game than a PSP game, and it weighs in at 40-plus hours..."



of 4 to 14) and turn limits per level to keep things moving. No time to dabble—the English (even dressed up as various swine and beasts) must be stopped! This may not sit well with tinkers as it forces many a quick decision and often times sacrifice, although I grew accustomed to it and over time came to welcome the challenge. Do you take this turn to heal a fond comrade or inflict a final blow and risk their demise next turn? Such is the heat of battle in Jeanne d'Arc. They return when the battle is won with any level increase awarded pre-death, so what's a nomen to do? What really grabs you though is the state of the graphics. Never have I seen such detail and architecture in a grid-based RPG. Jeanne d'Arc is one of the most beautiful PSP games I've ever seen. The SD character designs, which change with each passing costume and weapon upgrade, are simply a joy to behold, especially Jeanne in her transformed state—simply gorgeous. This looks more like a triple-A PS2 game than a PSP game, and it weighs

in at 40-plus hours (quick save gratefully included), placing it among the pinnacle of handheld RPGs alongside Monster Hunter and Valkyrie Profile Lenneth.

Jeanne d'Arc

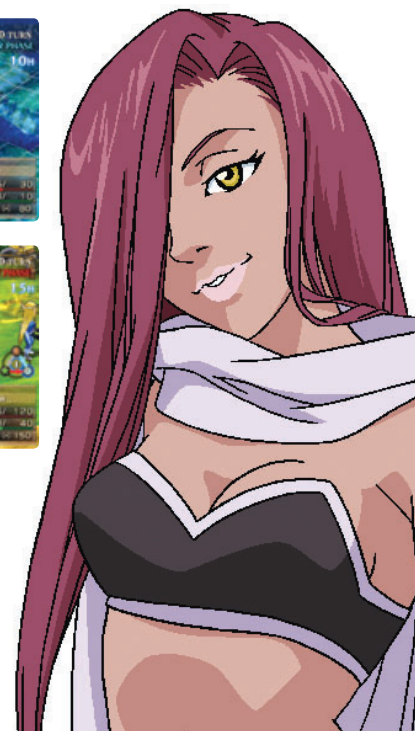
score 9.0

- + Plenty of new systems to separate it from the pack plus gorgeous graphics and a beautiful IG anime. Cool take on a legend too.
- Some may balk at the limited turn system; no free-roaming towns.

System(s)	PSP
Developer	Level-5
Publisher	SCEA
Online/Multi	NA
Available	August
ESRB Rating	RP



Great things, like character design, come in small packages.



Heroes of Mana

score 8.5

System(s)	DS	Multi	NA
Developer	Brownie Brown	Available	August 14, 2007
Publisher	Square-Enix	ESRB Rating	E 10+

When previewing Heroes of Mana, I let it slip that I'd never played a RTS game before. I'm humiliated to admit it, but it's true. Heroes will go down as the game that got me into real-time strategy. It's a beginner's title, but it's got depth that veterans will appreciate.

Set in the world of Mana, you lead the determined (and beautifully designed) Roget through a miniature tale of political intrigue and back-stabbery. Roget's crew is placed in a difficult spot when his home country declares war against the Beastmen of the forest. The plot unfolds between battles, but as charming as the story may be, gamers are going to come to Mana for the fighting. Which, by the way, plays extremely intuitively on the DS.

Using the stylus to circle troops is just perfect. It makes the game and, as if the existence of this quirky system hasn't already been justified a thousand times,



seems to be what the DS was designed for. It's such satisfying play. The physical action of stylus-guided battle is so enjoyable that I wanted to play the title just to use the input. It's like conducting a war.

New maps are available via Wi-Fi, and wireless mode pits player against player. Titles like this really make me wish I had some gamer friends. **Heather Campbell**

"Heroes will go down as the game that got me into real-time strategy."

Brave Story: New Traveler

score 8.0

System(s)	PSP	Multi	NA
Developer	Game Republic / SCEJ	Available	July 31
Publisher	XSEED	ESRB Rating	E

brave Story: New Traveler is one of three games based around a Japanese novel of the same name, and it doesn't take long to see why the PSP release ended up getting the most attention. Saying this game is visually stunning is an understatement; whatever voodoo developer Game Republic used to get Brave Story's graphics and character models to look as good as they do, and do so with almost no in-game load times, is some seriously powerful stuff.

Thankfully, under that shiny exterior, there's a rather enthralling game to be found and enjoyed. It's all very traditional in set-up: you're on a mission to save your friend, so you visit towns, meet new people, battle monsters, and recruit additional help to your cause. How things play out along the way is where a game like this either sinks or swims, and Brave Story is in no fear of drowning. The game's old-school mentality did occasionally cause me a bit of grief: random encounters—ugh—are still the norm, and there's

"Saying this game is visually stunning is an understatement..."



not a spec of UI for turn order or enemy HP to be found during combat. Yet, funny enough, the battleground is also where some of the game's biggest advancements are revealed, such as characters being able to level up mid-fight, or attacks carrying over to the next enemy after over-killing your initial target.

Thanks to XSEED, we're also getting the superior version of Brave Story to boot: not only did they save the game from import limbo, but they've thrown in a ton of new content and additional voice acting to make the wait worth it. **Eric L. Patterson**



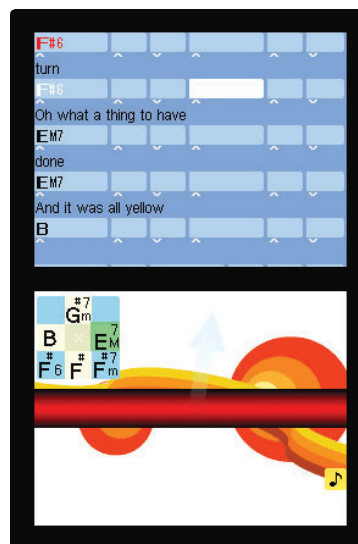
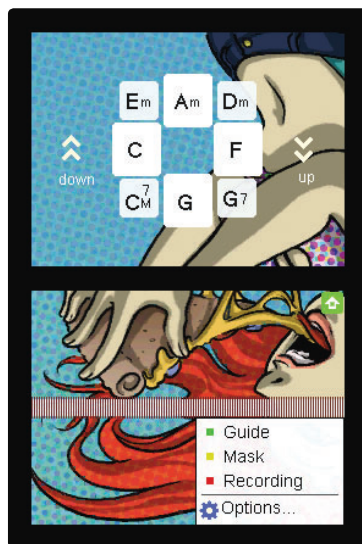
Visually among the PSPs best...ever.

Jam Sessions

preview

System(s)	Nintendo DS	Multi	NA
Developer	Plato	Available	September
Publisher	Ubisoft	ESRB Rating	E

One of the reasons I love the DS so much is that, thanks to its insane popularity in Japan, the handheld continues to receive a wide assortment of unique software beyond its library of games. A perfect example of such releases is M-06, a virtual guitar "game" published in Japan by Plato. Forget any thought you may have about Guitar Hero or Konami's Guitar Freaks; the purpose of M-06 was to re-create the feel and sound of playing a real acoustic guitar, with chords selected by holding the d-pad down and notes then played by "strumming" the touch screen. Even though I can't play a guitar to save my life, I picked up M-06, and boy did I have fun. After much trial, practice, and failed attempts, I was able to play my own little song thanks to the software, and it brought a huge smile to my face.



I never would have expected M-06 to make its way to the States, but thanks to Ubisoft, that's exactly what is happening. Retitled Jam Sessions for the U.S. market, this won't just be some quick "slap in English text and call it a day" type port; the

elements of the software that were previously in place are being touched up, and new features like UI skins and an option for recording your songs are being added. Expert musician or complete guitar newbie, keep your eye on this one. **Eric L. Patterson**

Pet Alien

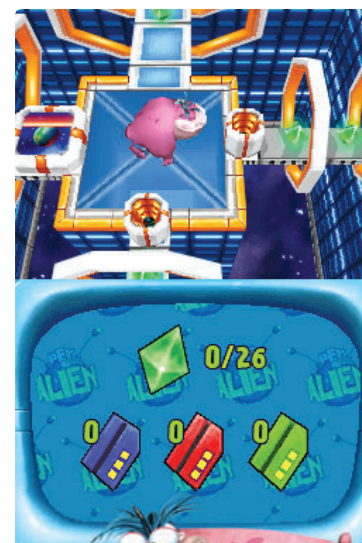
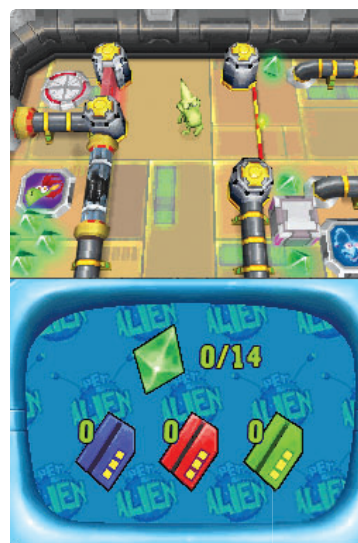
preview

System(s)	Nintendo DS	Multi	NA
Developer	Shinen	Available	August
Publisher	GameFactory	ESRB Rating	E

When it comes to the DS you never know what's going to hit it big. It could be a quiver of prehistoric mini-games, cute little doggies, or trying to spring a bunch of funky aliens from a galactic zoo after being snatched up by an unscrupulous evil doer. Such is the plight in Game Factory's spunky new action puzzler Pet Alien, as you curry about a massive spaceship unlocking mind-bending obstacles and outwitting mechanized creepy crawlies to get back to home sweet earth. When Robitix snatched up his human subject Tommy, he didn't bargain for the alien posse that came with him. Now Dinko, Gumpers, Scruffy, Swanky and Flip must work together via their unique signature moves to grab their human pal and reclaim their freedom. Pick-up-and-play fun is at hand in Pet Alien, as you unravel brain-twisting mazes and battle your way through each increasingly complex section of the ship. Mini games like Burp 'n Fart, Daydream and Asteroid Run break up the action nicely and the game has a quirky charm all its own. Developer Shinen (Iridion, Nanostray) are no stranger to the DS and it's showing here once again. **Dave Halverson**



Gumpers gets his groove on.



"Pick-up-and-play fun is at hand in Pet Alien, as you unravel brain-twisting mazes and battle your way through each increasingly complex section of the ship."





Nick Des Barres



Dai Kohama

Preview Debate

The Legend of Zelda: Phantom Hourglass

Link sets sail on Nintendo's blue ocean.

words Nick Des Barres & Casey Loe

the Legend of Zelda: Phantom Hourglass was just released in Japan, selling 300,000 copies in two days, the third-best debut in Japanese Zelda series history. We had intended to review it in this space, but unfortunately, time did not permit a full evaluation. You just don't review a Zelda without beating it first, and frankly, we're not entirely sure what to make of it yet. But the game has made a strong first impression on two of our editors.

Nick Des Barres: I think Phantom Hourglass may be the worst Zelda since Capcom's regrettable GameBoy Color games. Before I'm lynched, that still means it's better than 99% of other games out there...but what do you think, Mr. Loe?

Casey Loe: Comparing this to Oracle games is a low blow. In fact, so far I'm enjoying Hourglass more than Windwaker, the game that it's a direct sequel to. There are some questionable aspects to the stylus controls, but they add some flavor, and the game really benefits from the faster tempo and smaller areas typical of handheld games. Although maybe the reason I'm enjoying it so much is because I feared it would be terrible—Zelda is one of Nintendo's last hardcore franchises, and the thought of it being geared towards the brain-training set filled me with dread. But there's a lot of substance here!

NDB: I too thought it would be terrible—it looked visually bland since it was first announced, and it fares no better in its final release—but I guess I just wasn't prepared for a Zelda aimed at the "Touch! Generation". For God's sake, you don't use any *buttons*! When did this giant leap in human/machine interface occur? Am I an old man now? Will the children of ten years hence not be entirely sure what a "D-Pad" is, the way our generation has only a vague idea of how to operate a manual typewriter?

CL: As you well know, the D-Pad is wildly



"I guess I just wasn't prepared for a Zelda aimed at the "Touch! Generation."

Nick Des Barres

complicated and non-intuitive. You press up to move... up, I guess? And left to move... left? Is that it? It's so confusing! There's no way grandma can make sense of that! I agree that the stab-at-the-screen-with-the-stylus controls feel unnecessarily primitive, and a combined D-Pad and stylus control scheme would have been a big improvement. But the all-stylus controls are fine for movement and minor combat, and are a lot of fun when using projectile weapons and such. They do suck for advanced one-on-one combat, but there isn't much of that in the game, thankfully.

NDB: Which is a shame, considering the series has been quite brilliantly centered around one-on-one combat since Ocarina of Time. Like you say, the stylus control is fine. Nintendo has settled

comfortably into the whole stabbing-and-sweeping thing, but in this game, it serves no real purpose. The drawing-your-own-path-for-the boomerang thing is admittedly very cool, but everything else could have been accomplished at least as well if not better with traditional buttons. I understand Nintendo has bizarre hopes they can rekindle flagging Zelda sales in Japan by making it simple enough for your mom to play, but at least give longtime fans a traditional control scheme as an option. And don't get me started on the rolling.

CL: Pah! Combat has been an absolute joke in Zelda for ages. Standard battles in the series have always been too easy, so while in theory Twilight Princess had a fine combat system, the battles were completely free of tension. Replacing swordplay with combat that is more focused on picking up and throwing things or using the boomerang is fine with me. What's important is the quality of the puzzles and the sense of exploration, and Phantom Hourglass really seems to have nailed that. The draw-on-the-map memo system actually allows them to get a little more complicated with the puzzles—drawing an X between four points to find a place to dig, for example. Are you not satisfied with the island and dungeon design?

NDB: No, they're very nice so far. It's still a Zelda game by Nintendo, you're going to get a certain level of quality. I mainly have presentation and interface problems. If anything, Phantom Hourglass is actually *harder* than Twilight Princess. The puzzles and dungeons are typically well-designed (if insufferably drab—this game should never have been made full-polygon, the system just can't handle the faux cel-shading), but why tack on the grandma-



"I welcome this new twist on the franchise. It feels fresh, yet quintessentially Zelda."

Casey Loe

friendly controls if the meat of the game is going to be the Zelda we know and love? It defeats the purpose. I'd bet you five yen 95% of the Japanese casuals who buy this game because "oh, Zelda is a game I've heard of" will never beat it.

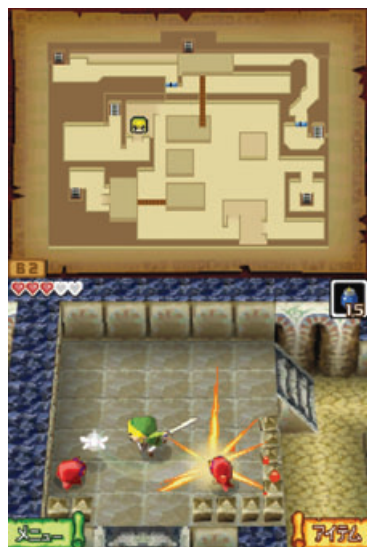
CL: Yeah, I can't imagine many casuals will love the time-limited dungeon crawls, either. But who cares what casual gamers think? What's important is that this is a game Zelda fans can enjoy. At least, they can enjoy certain aspects of it. I agree that the graphics are dingy, and that Windwaker character design doesn't work great on the DS. Also, the music is horrible—are Link's hideous saucer-eyes so processor intensive that they can't squeeze out something that sounds remotely like a real instrument?

I can't agree about the controls, though. They don't do a great job of recreating the traditional Zelda experience, but the developers seem to know that and they came up with a whole slew of new puzzle ideas and combat tactics that suit the touch screen better. A lot of people complained the Twilight Princess was just more of the same, and while I wasn't one of them, I welcome this new twist on the franchise. It feels fresh, yet quintessentially Zelda. So far, I'm having a blast.

NDB: I think the concept of the timed central dungeon is actually a good one, and certainly consistent with Zelda gimmicks of the past (collect more sand

for your hourglass in other dungeons, and you get more time to proceed deeper into it). My argument is simply that the game seems to be meeting the casuals halfway with imprecise stylus control, but not following through and delivering an easy game...so why make that concession at all?

But strangely, the American version isn't due for months...perhaps NoA might bless us with optional digital controls? In any case, I'm sure I'll keep playing Phantom Hourglass through to the end, and though I don't share your enthusiasm for it at this early stage, I might get there yet.



Final Fantasy XII: Revenant Wings

Square's official FFXII fanfic

words Nick Des Barres

Up front: If you haven't finished *Final Fantasy XII* yet (and if you haven't, I really hope you do), there might be a touch of spoilerish information in this review. You won't find out how the game ends or who the last boss is, but you might learn the fates of a few characters. You have been warned.

Final Fantasy XII: Revenant Wings is the strangest thing. It's a direct sequel to the hardest-core—the most, dare I

say it, *mature*—of recent numbered FFs, on the most lightweight of platforms. Aesthetically, in terms of its less-than-strategic gameplay, and above all with regards to its frothy, cheery story, *Revenant Wings* is a perfect match for the Nintendo DS. Quixotically, playing to those very strengths makes it a bit like a Saturday morning cartoon sequel to *Hamlet*. Where FFXII was elegant and literary, RW is cutesy and pulp. While the original was informed by a solidly

European artistic tradition, the ostensible sequel comes straight from the land of Hello Kitty. It would be an unmitigated disaster if it didn't work...but, almost unthinkably, it does.

You just have to skew your perceptions a little bit: Choose to think of the game as fan fiction. Japan has a long-standing tradition of *dojinshi*—the illustrated equivalent of the Western fanfic—and there is no question this story was written by someone other than the mythos'

original author. It goes without saying *Revenant Wings* is a game that could not have existed without the departure of original FFXII director Yasumi Matsuno from Square Enix, but thankfully, the characterizations here ring true, like the best *dojin* works do. This is the same Vaan and Penelo you know, albeit in situations as un-Matsunoesque as might be imagined.

Instead, *Revenant Wings* bears the mark of its director (Motomu Toriyama, of *Final Fantasy X-2* fame/infame, take your pick) quite strongly. Much as FFX-2

“Much as FFX-2 twisted the high drama of FFX into go-go girl power, this game takes the almost overpoweringly dour tone of FFXII and turns it completely upside down.”



Revenant Wings' meticulously-detailed character sprites prove Square still has the 2-D touch

twisted the high drama of FFX into go-go girl power, this game takes the almost overwhelmingly dour tone of FFXII and turns it completely upside down. A talking point I like to use in conversation to illustrate the difference is the character of Ba'Gamnan: You may remember him as a bloodthirsty bountyhunter and vicious murderer, a creature who would kill without a second thought. In *Revenant Wings*, he is reduced to the role of a Pokémon, controlled by Vaan and Penelo with an electric collar, crowing hoary dialogue like "I'd get you kids if it weren't for this damned thing around my neck!" A far cry from Matsuno's Machiavellian political intrigue, perhaps, but entertaining enough.

The story itself is very light and borders on the irrelevant, serving mostly to string together the series of missions that comprise the game proper. This is hardly a surprise, as *Revenant Wings* reportedly began development as a sequel to outsourced developer Think & Feel's well-regarded 2004 GameBoy Advance title, *Monster Summoner*. Indeed, it is almost structurally identical to that game, with the added sheen of Square Enix's superior artistic and musical talent. For what it's worth, the gauze-thin narrative has Vaan and Penelo emerging from Balthier and Fran's shadow, becoming full-fledged Sky Pirates of their own, and flying in their newly acquired airship (available from the beginning of the game, also à la FFX-2) to a legendary floating continent known as Lemurés. They meet a youth named Llyud, a member of a race of winged humanoids known as the Aegyl, who request that they help defend his land from marauding Sky Pirates after its precious natural resources. Along for the ride are a couple of extremely minor NPCs from FFXII, the Dalmaskan street urchins Kytes and Filo, and even the Dalmaskan Queen Ashe and Archadian



"Final Fantasy XII: *Revenant Wings* is an essentially unassailable game, except for the above-mentioned tepid difficulty."

Judgemaster Basch put in appearances, however improbable.

So what makes *Revenant Wings*, with a story that tiptoes dangerously close to bastardization, like a bad Sherlock Holmes novel written long after the death of Doyle, as good as it is? Why, the game itself, of course. *Revenant Wings* is another example of those curious Japanese adventures of late like the original FFXII, *Blue Dragon* and *Eternal Sonata* that provide almost no real challenge but nonetheless remain a joy to play. If you didn't already know, this game is not an RPG but an RTS—a genre switchup that might be more surprising if we weren't already viewing it through the transformative lens of Matsuno austerity-to-Toriyama effervescence. Wholly removed from the brilliant modernization of the traditional J-RPG scheme seen in FFXII, RW might best be compared to Square Enix's own *Heroes of Mana*, another RTS-lite. Each "party member," perhaps better called a unit in the context of the game, commands their own party

of summoned monsters, over fifty in all, unlocked via spending Auracite earned in battle on a "License Ring" that recalls the License Boards of vanilla FFXII. This naturally leads to a slew of onscreen characters all doing furious pyrotechnic battle. Square has hit on an instantly magical combination of 3D backgrounds and 2D characters here that truly draws out the DS's strengths.

As for the nitty-gritty, almost everything is controlled by the stylus (you can even draw boxes around units for casting ranged spells, a neat feature borrowed from computer GUIs the world over), making for crispy, natural gameplay and relatively short missions. It's perfect for on-the-go play...but be warned, *Revenant Wings* is *not* an RPG, no matter how much Square Enix wants you to think it is. There are no towns, only a rudimentary shop and item synthesis system, and every new location means another RTS mission. Thankfully, they're a blast: Watching your little summoned army march around defeating enemies and securing spawn points (from which you or your opponent can summon reinforcements, depending on who controls them) is tons of fun. Unfortunately, it's just not very challenging. Almost every story mission can be completed by selecting your entire troupe and simply having them march forward; only in the optional missions does it usually become necessary to select individual targets and skills.

Final Fantasy XII: *Revenant Wings* is an essentially unassailable game, except

for the above-mentioned tepid difficulty. It's absolutely gorgeous, sounds great (most of the music is recycled from Hitoshi Sakimoto's bombastic score for FFXII, masterfully reprogrammed for the DS), plays wonderfully, and clocks in at a healthy-for-a-portable-game 25 hours or so. The x-factor, here, is of course the story—a sequel to a tale its original creator almost certainly had no intentions of writing a sequel to—and that might be a dealbreaker for some. In truth, FFXII:RW may have functioned better as a totally new IP, but if you can convince yourself you're playing a gigantic, impeccably well-made dojin game, you're going to have a great time. *Revenant Wings* is available now in Japan, and will be released Stateside (reportedly with ramped up difficulty) in the fourth quarter.

Final Fantasy XII: *Revenant Wings*

score 8.0

- + Incredibly lush visuals, good characterization, snappy gameplay
- Unfortunately easy, theme and story are a 180° turn from the original FFXII

System(s)	Nintendo DS
Developer	Square/Think & Feel
Publisher	Square Enix
Online/Multi	NA
Available	Now Japan, Q4 US

Mizuiro Blood

Only in Japan

words Dai Kohama

mizuiro Blood is a game I don't expect anyone reading this to ever actually play, but it's a game everyone needs to know about. Its official genre is "Incoherent Instant-Death Love Comedy". That's right: On the box where it usually says "Action," or "RPG," Mizuiro Blood stares you right in the face and brazenly declares: "I am an Incoherent Instant-Death Love Comedy." If that doesn't pique your interest, perhaps it's time to put this magazine down and go play some more Madden. I'm honestly not quite sure where to begin here. Mizuiro (a shade of blue, literally "water-colored") Blood might as well hail from a different dimension. Even assigning it a score is almost arbitrary: It could be a ten, while simultaneously also existing as a zero, like Schroedinger's Cat. It stars a fashionable girl robot named Mizuiro who has an unfortunate tendency to get sliced in half rather often, splattering the titular Blood everywhere—deathly poison to humans. Her best friend and rival in matters romantic, Lovenelly, is a slab of fish cake. Her mother, named Mother,

wishes fervently for the extinction of the human race—and should you go to the store and buy a present for her, Mizuiro will request "a corsage that would look good on a monster." Other friends and acquaintances include Mr. Kato, who likes to paint himself red and imagine he moves three times faster than normal, and Naruto, whose famous name is not a coincidence. The Japanese pop-culture references fly fast and furious, which is only the first of two major impediments toward import-friendliness in Mizuiro Blood...but I hope you're still with me.

The object of the game is simple: Play as Mizuiro, lovely girl robot, and lead a successful campaign in life and love while attending school at the Blood Academy. Don't worry if she gets hacked in two, crushed, skewered, or blown up, because it happens all the time—and like she says herself, it's okay, she's a robot. Actual gameplay, all stylus controlled, is broadly divided into rhythm mini-games (with influence from Taiko Drum Master: Its main characters even make cameos), touch-action mini-games, and sequences that require you to write on the screen

in Japanese kana characters. This is the second import stumbling block, but for those learning the language, all the words you have to write are very simple, and might even make for good writing practice. Mizuiro Blood is in the end just a very well-made minigame collection, and God knows there are enough of those on DS. But with Namco Bandai's absolutely bonkers presentation (yes, this is pushing it even for authentic Japanese people), it becomes a shining example of the sorts of games tiny DS development budgets now allow the market to support. Bravo, Namco: If any game has ever lived up to a fanciful claim on the box, it is Mizuiro Blood. Incoherent Instant-Death Love Comedy—a new genre is born.

"On the box where it usually says 'Action,' or 'RPG,' Mizuiro Blood stares you right in the face and brazenly declares: 'I am an Incoherent Instant-Death Love Comedy.'"



Yukiko Yokoo's character designs should look familiar to fans of Taiko Drum Master.



Mizuiro Blood		score 7.0
+	Mizuiro Blood is like no other game...ever.	
-	Unfortunate brevity, handwriting recognition can be a little iffy	
System(s)	Nintendo DS	
Developer	Namco	
Publisher	Namco Bandai	
Online/Multi	NA	
Available	Now Japan, Unannounced US	

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Richard Garriott's

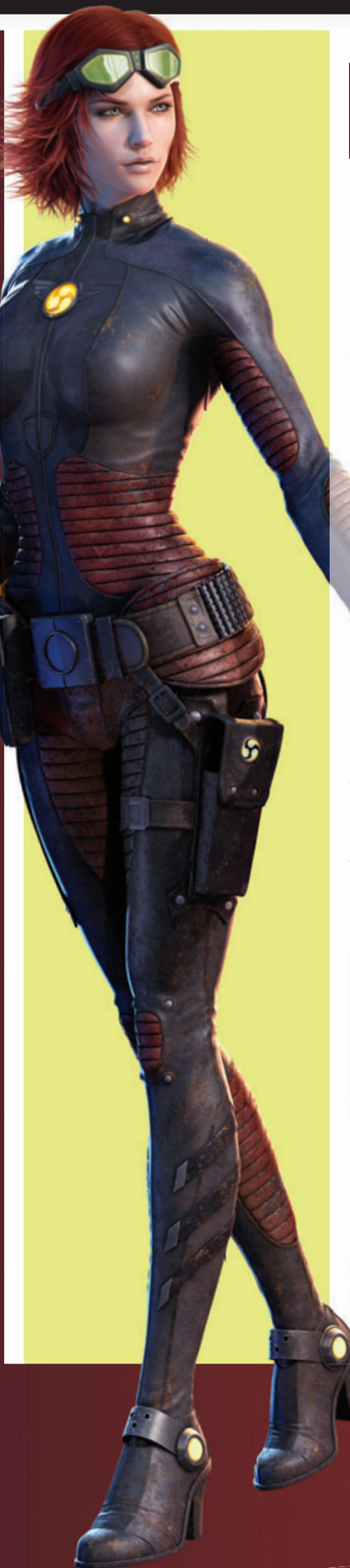
Tabula Rasa

The universe needs you

words Mike Griffin

"We want you to feel like you don't even notice it's an online game, other than the fact that you're playing alongside other people."

Starr Long, Producer, Tabula Rasa



the MMORPG genre is desperately seeking a release from its shackles of staid design. There are way too many cookie cutter releases, way too much inept action and storytelling, and the technical elements are usually on par with a single-player title from several years ago. There are obviously stand-outs like WoW and LotR Online that have refined the decade-old template very nicely, but perhaps we need to stop polishing the same carrot-chasing routines and start looking for some new experiences. I'm certainly aiming to renew my faith, and Richard Garriott's Tabula Rasa is preaching a litany of changes the genre absolutely needs.

From the moment you notice your viewpoint is centered by a targeting reticule, you know Tabula Rasa is going to be a genre breaker. The game is very much half-shooter, half-RPG, not only in its basic feel, but also in its flow and pacing. When you're not diving into TR's complex instanced missions (more on those later), most of your time is spent tearing across multiplayer shooter-like battlefields, fighting a non-stop war for survival with thousands of participants on the game's two giant planets.

"We make it feel like there's a war going on and give you that feeling that you've only had in story shooters like Call of Duty and Medal of Honor. That kind of feeling they evoke, but in a sci-fi MMO. We want you to feel like you don't even notice it's an online game, other than the fact that you're playing alongside other people." This is Starr Long, the game's producer: veteran developer, long time amigo of Richard Garriott, and currently stationed

at NCsoft Austin. He's talking about the ongoing war between the Bane, Tabula Rasa's Earth-killing bad guys, and the AFS—the Allied Free Sentients, on whose behalf you'll be kicking ass in this conflict.

"One of our big features are the control points on a map. The NPCs are programmed to fight for those control points. Who owns these control points gets linked to a bunch of variables, like where I can resurrect when I die, where I can teleport, what shopkeepers are available and what mission NPCs are available," the producer explains. Keen eyes may recognize TR's engine as an upgraded version of the Auto Assault engine. This suite contains server technology that is exceptionally good at managing dozens of organized AIs in ongoing NPC warfare, a strength perfectly suited to Tabula Rasa's real-time battlefield. "If you look at other MMOs, they have AI with pretty much three behaviors: attack, heal, and maybe a debuff. We wanted to be way more interesting than that when you're fighting our creatures on these battlefields," Long comments.

The enemies prove to be surprisingly tactical, efficient, and entertaining. Shield drones, for example, will generate a large and practically impenetrable barrier around enemy squads. The Bane healers—

Player vs. Player

There are two basic types of PVP in TR. The first is called Dueling and it can happen between just two players, or up to two squads of six players each. The second kind of PVP is clan vs. clan warfare, where clans of up to 200 players can fight each other over a defined period of time. Both kinds of PVP can happen in any part of the game at any time. Motivation to participate in PVP includes bragging rights as well as status on the ladders. All PVP activity in TR is consensual, so players have to agree to engage in it.



Simply red

All armor in the game can be dyed, so even if you're wearing the exact same armor as another person you can change it to a different color. There are multiple pieces of kit for each armor type: a player can use a certain armor type on his hands and torso and chose a different one for his legs or feet. Some armor types are exclusive to certain classes so there will be a signature look for certain archetypes. Graviton armor, for example, can only be worn at Tier 3 of the Soldier branch of the class tree.



called Caretakers—not only heal enemy troops, they'll also resurrect them and poison you for good measure. You'll want to take out shield drones (electro-magnetic weapons do the trick) and neutralize Caretakers as soon as possible. Beware the Bane's sniper unit, the Lightbender, who is completely immune to laser-based weaponry. With another nod to shooters, cover actually means something in Tabula Rasa: how much cover you're behind and how exposed you are affects the damage you take in real-time.

It's usually better to give than take, and Tabula Rasa provides players with ample damage-dealing capabilities, regardless of class. Long highlights: "You don't specialize in damage types per se, only in weapon use. So there's Firearms, which covers pistols, rifles and shotguns, then there's propellant guns, which covers flame throwers, poisons, and ice spray, and there are chain guns, rocket launchers, RPGs, net guns, cluster bombs...and all the different classes have specializations for them. So if you go the Soldier route, they'll use chain guns. If you go Specialist, they might use injector guns that are good at piercing shields and doing damage over time." TR's M.O. is that everyone is a soldier, so everyone can deal damage and solo creatures



reasonably well. To keep your bloodlust stoked, the game will even reward bonus experience for going on killing streaks.

With four tiers of class selections on the way to Tabula Rasa's level 50 cap and so many forms of specialization, it would be far too easy to make a regrettable decision on your way to the top. TR removes the worry from this process with cloning, which allows players to create an exact copy of themselves—a snapshot of their current character—that can be put aside and later reinstated if life isn't going according to plan. "What we obviously expected was that people would clone right before they made their big tier class choices, like before they decided they'd be soldier or specialist, commando or ranger, things like that...what we're also seeing is people are cloning before they do even minor changes, like how many points they spend on their body stat or mind stat, or how many points they've spent on lightning or sprint. We're seeing people experiment with all sorts of tweaks. People seem to really, really love cloning; this convenience to do a lot more character exploration than they were used to before." It's vital to make character choices feel important in MMOs, not just like a dinner menu with a Class Du Jour, so the team is still narrowing down how many clones a player will be able to keep at one time.

So far we've explored many of Tabula Rasa's epic action-based features, but there's also a very intimate instanced-based mission system where the RPG side of the game is allowed to flourish. With most of the key figures behind the Ultima series now on the Tabula Rasa team, it should come as no surprise to players that over 20% of the game's missions will include deep, branching moral decisions that affect the course of events. These "ethical parables" will often develop from within your current quest, and TR's private instanced maps are hand-crafted, carefully paced-out affairs with plenty of interactive elements to accompany said decisions. In one mission, for example, you'll be tasked with infiltrating a Bane powerplant on the vaguely Earth-like

planet of Foreus. Once you reach the core, after disabling alarms and scouting ahead via camera security systems, you'll have to take out fuel lines while noxious gases fill the chamber, and as a mini-sun threatens to go super-nova and wipe out the area.

Missions on the bleak and volcanic second planet of Arieki take on a different complexion. Wildlife here is exotic, stony and aggressive. This planet was once a prison colony for the Brann. After the Bane destroyed the Brann homeworld, the prisoners suddenly became their race's last survivors and the Irendas Penal Colony their only home. On Arieki you'll explore fiery locales like the burning mires and fetid hive colonies, aiding the Brann, your fellow refugees, in the war against the Bane. A third planet is already well into production (rumored to include another playable race), however it won't be in orbit until the game's first expansion, sometime in 2008.

I'm still holding out for Huxley as that first bombastic MMO shooter experience, but I suspect it won't come close to Tabula Rasa for overall RPG depth and storyline quality. And while it's been years since these gentlemen have actually released a game, I'm still hugely swayed by the notion of Garriott and Long at the helm of a modern MMO. When you hear them speak about their game, there's a deep understanding of the genre and why their choices make sense. Heck, Richard even created an entire pictographic language set—the Logos—to go along with Tabula Rasa's lore. That's the kind ambition and obsession this genre needs.

Richard's Garriott's Tabula Rasa

System(s)	PC
Developer	Destination Games
Publisher	NCsoft
Online/Multi	Thousands of players
Available	September

preview



Sounds of Crysis

words Mike Griffin

award-winning composer Inon Zur reeled in a big fish this time. There's no doubt that Zur has enjoyed quality gaming moments with Baldur's Gate 2, Champions of Norrath, Prince of Persia 2 and 3, and Warhammer 40K, among others, but c'mon...this is Crysis. The combination of Crytek's technical wizardry and EA's depthless coffers has this game quietly stalking the jungle like a feral cat, ready to rip the throat out of all the FPS pretenders this fall. In late June, Inon Zur spoke to Play about his extensive work on the Crysis soundtrack.



interview

Inon Zur, Lead Composer, Crysis

play: How deep was Crysis in development when you found out you'd be the game's lead composer? This is a really big title.

Inon Zur: I actually started working on the game when it was quite deep into development. The developers showed me videos capturing gameplay and many pictures and scripts. When I saw everything for the first time, I thought the story was interesting and somewhat unusual, and the graphics were astounding. Crytek is pushing the boundaries on all fronts of the game's

design, production and presentation.

Crysis has a significant sci-fi element, but it's not a very distant future and it's still a familiar environment. Yet there's this whole alien invasion aspect and some really exotic game areas. How did your initial musical concept evolve?

Crysis starts musically with orchestral sounds along with some Far East influence; these are the main components of the early score. But then...something happens. The whole story gets a sharp twist and the score reflects this storyline. I combined organic sound design with synth elements and some orchestral arrangements. We recorded the orchestra parts with the Northwest Sinfonia in Seattle. I've previously worked with these top musicians on other FPS titles such as SOCOM II and Shadow Ops: Red Mercury. The outcome on Crysis is very other-worldly and quite different from other projects I've worked on in the past. The technique of scoring this game is heavily involved with the detail-oriented aspects of music implementation, so the result

is a dynamic, multi-layered score.

Is there any emphasis on a particular musical style to convey the idea of this looming alien threat? Did you choose certain instruments, hardware or software?

In many cases of scores which have original concepts, it is not really down to the type of instruments and sounds and software, but it is in the method of using them. I wrote a mixture of orchestral and electronic sounds that came to be something very alien and unique. The music says: you know that you're still on earth, but something new has happened... something that has never happened here before. The orchestral sounds represent all that's known and familiar; however, by the time the other sound design with synthetic sounds merge, it conveys the new element that has just come to life.

Crytek only has a two-game portfolio but it's clearly one of the most advanced game developers on the planet. With EA's considerable back-

Agile audio

play: Crytek's previous game (2004's Far Cry) employed an advanced music engine that allowed for dynamic mixing of exploration tunes and combat tracks. What kind of sound engine are we going to hear in Crysis?

Joe Zajonc, Audio Director, Crytek: Crytek's audio programmers have developed a music system which seamlessly switches between different intensities based on gameplay. The music system receives input from lots of sources—player action and enemy action included. These inputs change the music. To satisfy the nimble music system, Inon Zur had to compose parallel themes of varying intensity. He also provided ornamental elements which keep the music fresh and provide variation to the overall piece but also highlight key gameplay moments. It's great to be able to efficiently combine complex gameplay music with cinematic score elements.

"...what I'm most proud of is that we did not fall into the trappings of aiming for the usual mainstream blockbuster movie sound."

Inon Zur, Lead Composer, Crysis

ing, Crysis has a big budget and lots of marketing ahead. The game also has a huge hardcore following already. Could this end up being your most successful game project to date?

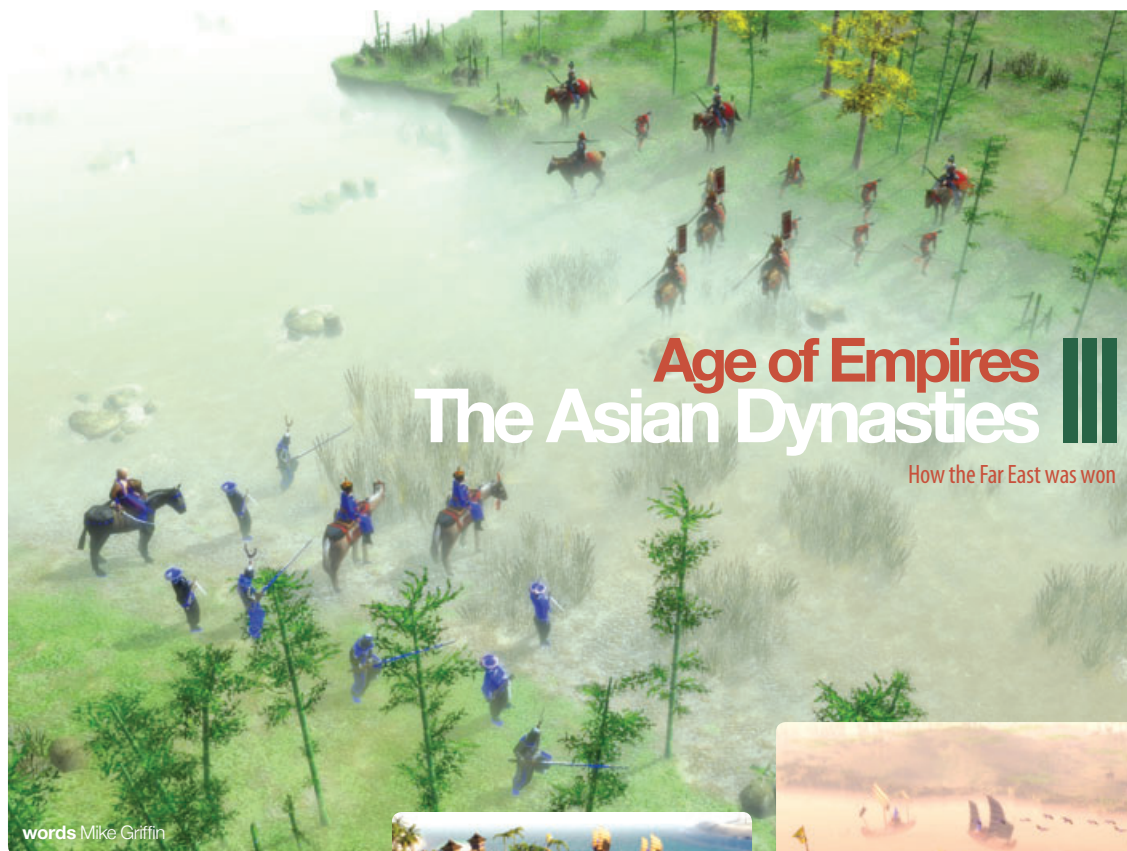
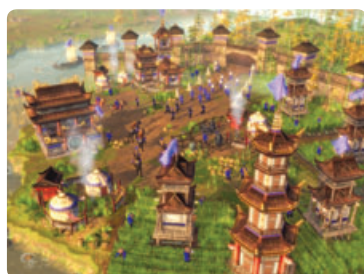
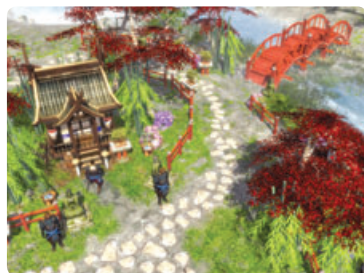
There is no doubt Crysis is one of my biggest game titles to date. I have to say what I'm most proud of is that we did not fall into the trappings of aiming for the usual mainstream blockbuster movie sound; we really took more daring steps towards creating a different kind of score that is both cinematic and immersive...more importantly it could only work for this game. I have to compliment Joe Zajonc, the Audio Director on Crysis. He helped me to better understand the game, and with his experience and innovation, he inspired me to compose this more unique sounding game score. It was a thoroughly enjoyable and creative collaboration, perhaps closer to the composer/director relationship more often experienced in the film world than on any game I've worked on in the past.

Thank you, Inon.
www.inonzur.com



Captain Huang
dressed for
success.

“...fans of Rise of Nations will nod and approve of Big Huge Games’ handling of the Dynasties.”



words Mike Griffin

there's more Age of Empires 3 goodness coming this fall for fans of the stalwart historical RTS franchise, and this time Rise of Nations developer Big Huge Games is behind the curtain—under the guidance of series' originator Ensemble Studios. The Asian Dynasties is the game's forthcoming expansion, introducing three new factions and chronicling Asian society and culture from early 15th to late 19th century. While AoE 3 fans shouldn't expect any dramatic changes, fans of Rise of Nations will nod and approve of Big Huge Games' handling of the Dynasties.

"It's kind of like getting to be the special guest director on an episode of our favorite TV show," Big Huge Games' CEO Brian Reynolds explains. "We've tried to give the game our own unique BHG spin while at the same time staying true to the spirit of the original game. Ensemble has been very kind to let us play in their sandbox." Fleshing out AoE 3's world, the nations of China, Japan and India each enjoy a long five-scenario campaign in The Asian Dynasties. Many of the people and events are historically accurate, such as Shogun Tokugawa in the Japanese campaign and his establishment of the Tokugawa Shogunate. "Obviously we've also created some of our own characters, and parts of the campaigns depict events of a more hypothetical nature—such as the possibility of a Ming Treasure Ship finding its way



to the New World," Reynolds recounts.

Dynasties uses the same engine as the previous AoE 3 expansion, The WarChiefs, and it still manages to put on a nice show; most code changes here involve tweaks to the interface, like the addition of a lot more hotkeys. Big Huge has also incorporated new rules to reflect each new faction's prime tactics. In a nutshell: China will emphasize the capability to amass large armies of cheap units, Japan will focus on powerful but expensive units, while India's advancement allows them to quickly build out what's known as a "fast fortress" economy. The Asian nations have valuable commodities like spice, tea and silk to offer potential European trade partners and The Asian Dynasties provides nice, fluid trade routes to keep your transactions flowing—provided you maintain ownership of trading posts along the way. Once you've allied with one of your foreign suitors, you'll enjoy the perks of military intervention, elite troops and new technologies.

The developers are still suppressing many details about civs and units, however we've seen Japan's hulking samurais,



India's coast-prowling catamaran gunners and fearsome arsonists, and China's disciplined bands of horsemen. "The goal of this project wasn't to turn Age of Empires into Rise of Nations by any means," Reynolds elucidates, "so you're not going to see national borders or attrition, or anything crazy like that." Players will, however, see the mechanics of Wonders handled in a fashion very similar to RoN, bestowing five special abilities to each Dynasties faction as they "age up" their advancement. With two of the genre's masters crafting this expansion, we're bound to witness many other wonders.

Age of Empires III The Asian Dynasties

System(s)	PC
Developer	Big Huge Games/Ensemble Studios
Publisher	Microsoft Game Studios
Online/Multi	2-8 Home City/Skirmish
Available	September

preview



ask alienware

no. 013 // august 2007

In this month's Ask Alienware, we lament the slow decline of Open GL, ponder going wired or wireless for the best possible home PC gaming, speak to RAM on Vista, and chart the path of 64-bit apps.

Q. Like many new Windows Vista users have discovered, I feel the UAC (User Account Control) system can be somewhat disruptive and annoying—all those nasty permission pop-ups! As a gamer, I consider myself to be a power user who doesn't install suspicious things and keeps his machine updated and protected, so I'd like to shut down UAC. What is Alienware's perception of UAC and what type of user should/shouldn't be using it? Marc, WA.



Alienware: UAC has important benefits, such as protecting the user from viruses and spyware. As a result, it's a good idea for everyone to utilize the UAC, otherwise your system will be put at risk. Once you are playing a game, the UAC should not interfere with your gameplay.

Q. Are PC games going to stop using Open GL? I remember when most of the big PC shooters were compatible with both Direct X and Open GL. Remember Quake GL? Lately, it seems like Open GL is all but extinct in PC game development. Will it be strictly Dx10 going forward? Chris, NY.



Alienware: Some PC games will still utilize OpenGL. Most freeware game developers utilize OpenGL architecture to develop mods or indie games. This allows smaller game developers to use tools that would otherwise be limited to only larger game developers. However, most of the major game titles released this year will be DirectX 10.



Q. Given the choice, where I can have a wireless connection to my router or a direct connection to the router through a LAN cable (and if both connections work flawlessly), a real gamer would still choose the LAN cable, right? I mean for the best possible speed? Or is it kind of meaningless if both connections are at peak bandwidth? Jared, CA.

Alienware: In most cases, a wired connection is faster than a wireless connection. However, due to 802.11g/n and MIMO technology, these differences continue to shrink every year. Eventually, you will not be able to tell the difference between wired or wireless when running your applications due to the increase in speed of wireless technology.

Q. I see a lot of different numbers when it comes to how much RAM you can use under Windows Vista. I think the maximum is 4 GB in 32-bit Vista and a great deal more in the 64-bit edition. I've also read about the strange memory use of Vista. It seems to need a great deal more physical RAM than XP and allocates large amounts to graphics and other stuff. As a gamer now running Vista 32-bit, is the 2 GB I've been using for the last year still good enough, or is Vista using so much memory compared to XP that I need to add more RAM? Colin, CA.

Alienware: Generally speaking, the more RAM you have, the more your system's performance will increase. Vista benefits from more RAM: the max for a 32-bit version is 4GB, while the max for a 64-bit version is 128GB. You can still run your applications with what you have, but we recommend upgrading to 4GB so your applications run more efficiently.

Q. It's ironic that today's best processors are 64-bit, but most of the PC-using world is still using a 32-bit operating system. Microsoft kind of slowed down the evolution by making Home Premium (32-bit) its most popular edition of Vista. When does Alienware expect consumer 64-bit to finally come into its own, so we can finally begin to take full advantage of these lovely 64-bit CPUs? Please don't say, "Five years from now, when Microsoft introduces the next Windows" because that's what I'm beginning to fear... Jeff, TX.

"Once you are playing a game, the UAC should not interfere with your gameplay."



Alienware: 64-bit applications exist more on the workstation market, which requires a 64-bit OS. As the adoption rate begins to increase on workstation applications, the 64-bit architecture will funnel down to consumer applications. Microsoft realized that the transition to 64-bit will occur within Vista's lifespan. That's why, for example, they offer the choice of installing a 32-bit or 64-bit version of Vista Ultimate.



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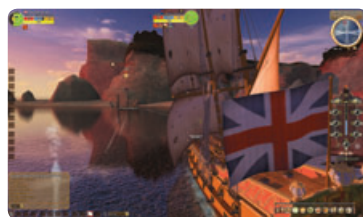


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SOE drops anchor on Pirates MMO

after years of semi-independent development, Flying Labs Software has scored a deal with SOE's Platform publishing label to distribute its massively multiplayer title, *Pirates of the Burning Sea*. The colonial-era buccaneering of PotBS shouldn't be confused with the other *Pirates* franchises. *Pirates of the Burning Sea* is an original and mature universe featuring France, Spain, England and Pirate factions trawling the Caribbean

for treasure, mayhem and conquest. Take on the role of naval officer, traveling merchant, mischievous pirate or swash-buckling privateer, and adventure across dozens of persistent online ports and islands. Players can build quarries and run distilleries, operate businesses and traffic goods. Intense ship-to-ship sea battles and an extensive port conquest system secure the epic scope. With SOE's reach and marketing, *Pirates of the Burning Sea* is now sailing towards a much brighter horizon.



Upshift StrikeRacer rolls out first beta



tired of the usual persistent online worlds? Or perhaps your limited schedule makes it difficult to spend long hours with online titles. Gala-Net is counting on both as it introduces Upshift StrikeRacer, a free-to-play, quick session car combat game that you play online with and against other racers across Triumph City. You'll have 60 ranks (think MMO levels) to climb through by demolishing your foes and winning races and events. Vehicles offer customizable paint, guns, cannons, mines, and driving enhancements. The 3D engine caters to a wide range of PC specs, so don't expect next-gen grade visuals here. Your gnarly "I'm ready for Crysis" video card will, however, run the game obscenely smooth. With guild-like Clubs set for implementation and a collection of item shop upgrades on the way, Upshift StrikeRacer is primed to be a popular beta this summer.

Rocketfish USB Gaming Headset

C Available for \$49.99 at your local Best Buy, the Rocketfish USB Gaming Headset is a surprisingly good product that lives up to its price point. The Rocketfish headset scores big

right away with its easy set-up: you simply plug it in to a free USB outlet on your PC or Mac and the computer recognizes the device right away. No fiddling with adapters and no drivers to install. You'll be ready to use it in a game in under a minute.

We tested the Rocketfish headset on a PC with Battlefield 2142 and Lord of the Rings Online (both offer built-in voice chat) and the device performed extremely well. The soft ear cups and head band made for comfortable sessions and the mic arm is sufficiently adjustable. After the games, we popped-in the new Arctic Monkeys album and the Rocketfish headset happily produced a satisfying range of sound, far better than its price tag and intended use might suggest. With its effortless installation and surprisingly good sound quality, the Rocketfish USB gaming headset is easy to recommend.





WITCHBLADE

Be witched

words Dave Halverson

I ntrigued (to put it lightly) by Gonzo's *Witchblade* character designs, the actual finished anime isn't at all what I expected.

What I expected was a somewhat religious take on the US comic/TV property about a female cop who becomes the Witchblade (Yancy Butler flashbacks be damned!), but what I got was a thoroughly Japanese interpretation, or so it would seem.

Masane Amaha is a mother on the run, found at the epicenter of a devastating earthquake that changed the face of Japan; she's worn out her welcome at the local homeless shelter and decided to go it on her own, which doesn't sit well with the totalitarian Child Welfare Agency, concerned for the safety of her young daughter, who also happens to wear the

pants in the family. The strong-willed and wise beyond her years little girl soon finds herself in protective custody, and her mother behind bars. The only thing that can save them is the Witchblade, which chose her as its host on that fateful day in the eye of the storm.

The struggle at the center of *Witchblade* is a very human one between mother and daughter, the adoptive family we come to know around them, and the mega-maniacal corporations that will stop at nothing to control the Witchblade's omnipotent power. It's anything but a corny comic-book scenario. It has real heart, and real choices... and okay, mega fan service in between. When Masane becomes the Witchblade her ample breasts swell to epic proportion, she's prone to licking things constantly, and her nether region gives

new meaning to the axiom crotch shot. A small price to pay for one of the most beautifully produced new anime series of the year, or perhaps decade for that matter. These East-meets-West ventures seem to be the way forward for anime to truly blossom in the US.

"The struggle at the center of *Witchblade* is a very human one between mother and daughter..."

Witchblade

score 9.5

- + Surprisingly rich and well developed storyline; beautiful production, first-rate English-speaking cast, sexy as all hell
- I'll get back to you on that...or not.

Released By	FUNimation
Volume	1
Running Time	100 Minutes
Episodes	1-5
Rating	TV PG
Available	September 25

The Third

The Girl with the Blue Eye

Tank Girl

words Dave Halverson

Not since Leona Bonaparte has the connection between tank and girl been so unyielding. Only where Bonaparte was the inanimate apple of Leona's eye, Bogey is the tiny AI system that navigates Honoka's giant sand tank/HQ—and runs their business, and keeps her rambunctious spirit in check. The pair's constant contact is at the center of *The Third*, which is a busy place to be since the Earth has fallen prey to the fallout of rampant technology. Above the urban façade of the lower areas—rustic villages cloaking a desert world of low tech and martial law—*The Third* acts as judge, jury and executioner—an elite master race whose job is keeping humanity's penchant for destructive technology in check, using high technology to sustain a dogmatic peace.

In this world, Jack of all trades Honoka is wired into everything. She's loved by all in the villages for her humanitarian efforts and bubbly spirit and is the first line of defense for *The Third* when they need the skills of a "Sword Dancer." A one-woman killing machine, Honoka will take any job that helps her

"The Third acts as judge, jury and executioner—an elite master race whose job is keeping humanity's penchant for destructive technology in check..."



sustain her nomadic life as a weapons/tech junkie and keep her conscience (Bogey) in check, as long as it doesn't involve killing any humans, which isn't difficult in a world overrun by enormous insects.

Initially she seems to coexist peacefully with both sides until *The Third* begins to push a more totalitarian agenda. When her friends get caught in the crossfire, well, let's just say that the series begins where Volume 1 ends.

The Third: The Girl with the Blue Eye is an extraordinary new series. Partially narrated and especially well-written, the animation is way above par for a 24-episode series as is the overall production, melding fluid digital animation with beautifully rendered tanks and architecture. The voice acting follows suit, opting for an actress that sounds 17 over the typical high-pitched squeal associated with most heroines below drinking age. Find it, get it, and wait for more.

The Third: The Girl with the Blue Eye

score 9.0

- + Wonderfully told and written, great voice acting. Top-notch production across the board.
- Somewhat familiar character design

Released By	Right Stuf
Volume	1
Running Time	100 Minutes
Episodes	1-5
Rating	15+
Available	July 31



You have the right to remain drooling.



"Shonen Onmyouji is a series that could be quite the little gem..."

~ Chris Beveridge, Anime on DVD



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(Kyo Kara Maoh!, Fate / stay night)

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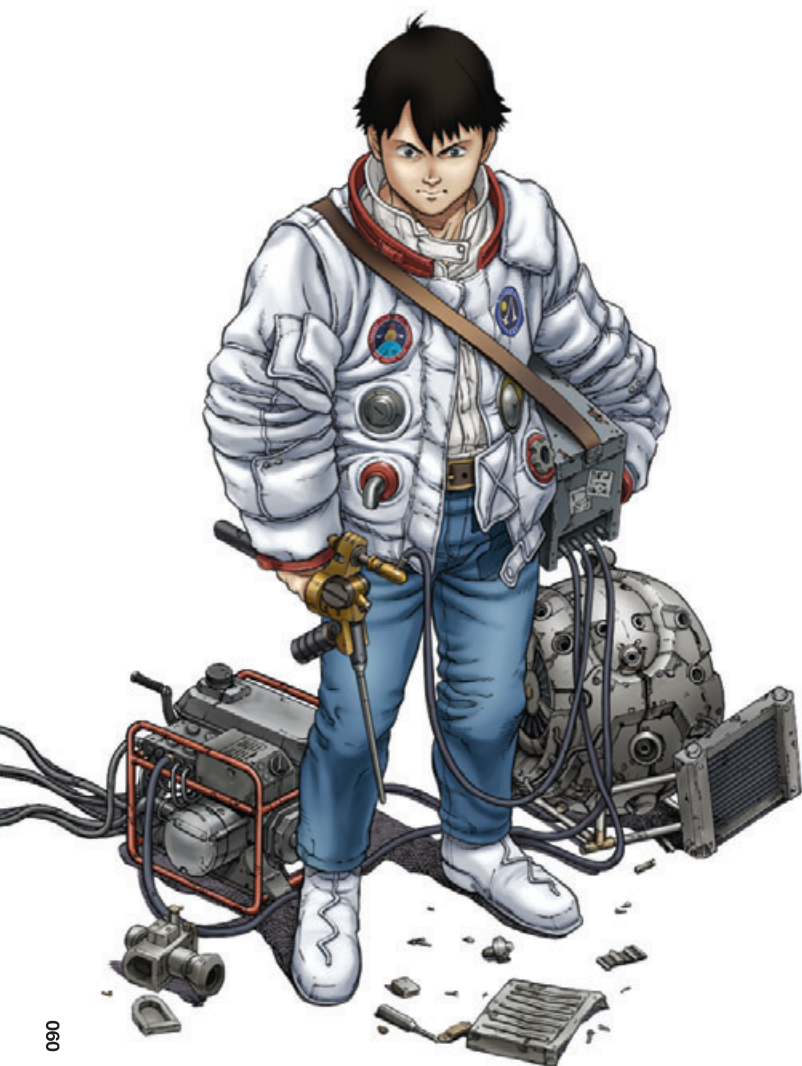
FREEDOM

Moonage daydream



“...every anime like *Freedom* should be relished—watched over and over for all it’s worth...”

words Dave Halverson



We were born at the right time. Gaming and anime seem to be reaching a peak relative to the time humanity has left until things go awry. If you think about it, ten years—essentially the time between now and when so much of the planet will be underwater that the fallout will change the balance of our existence—is two to three epics (like *Gears of War*, *Halo*, or *Heavenly Sword*) away. Measured in anime series it’s a slightly better forecast, although ten years still isn’t enough time to reach, say, holographic levels. And so every anime like *Freedom 1* should be relished—watched over and over for all its worth; partly to be greatly entertained and uplifted, and partly to get a sense of what life might be like on the moon, which is likely where those of us of lucky enough to afford the trip will end up. The first twin-format HD DVD/DVD anime release, *Freedom* is a gorgeous albeit short first episode (of 6) that sets the stage for its *Akira*-meets-*The Fast and the Furious*-in-space storyline, about a group of teenagers coming to terms with life in the

dome and the utopian government whose job is to make sure that history does not repeat itself. Rendered to perfection with character designs from Katsuhiro Otomo (*Akira*) presented in HD and adorned with among the most fascinating credits ever, *Freedom* is a little piece of what was right about our time here. Someone should put it in a satellite in case we don’t make it.

Freedom 1

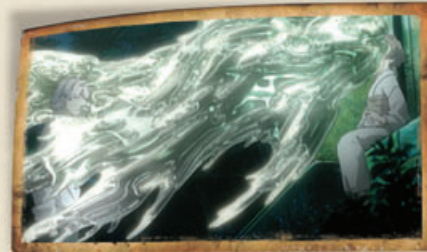
score **9.0**

- +** Hauntingly beautiful, great soundtrack, first HD anime
- So short... 2-6 can't arrive soon enough

Released By	Honneamise
Volume	1
Running Time	25 Minutes
Episodes	NA
Rating	13+
Available	June 26

One race to rule them all...



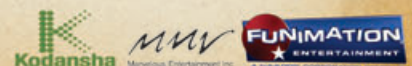


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Wings of Rean

Take us away

words Heather Campbell

prepare to be a little lost. *Wings of Rean* is a spin-off of a 1983 anime called *Aura Battler Dunbine*. Or maybe it's a continuation of the series. I don't know; I never saw *Dunbine*, and quite frankly, I don't believe you need to in order to enjoy *Rean*. That is, if you don't mind being a little disoriented.

Rean is a really compelling, history-rich anime that feels like it has a lot of backstory. Thrusting us into a world of modern-day, anti-American Japan, *Rean* opens with a misguided attack on a military base by one of our three protagonists. Aesap, friend of one of the aforementioned terrorists-to-be, is caught up in the political mess of the attack, and linked to the opera-

tion until GIANT FANTASTIC BATTLE-SHIPS launch out of the sea to distract the military from counterattacking our teenage heroes. These battle-ships are a wealth of anachronisms, featuring modern weaponry as well as old-timey intercoms, and they hail from a mythical world called Byston Well.

These three kids are onboard when the inter-warring ships return to their world beneath the Upper Realm, and we are barely introduced to princess Lyukus and her comrades when we find ourselves at the end of the first volume. That's \$39.99 of Japanese-only, Bandai Visual madness. But think of it like *Lord of the Rings*. When you're dropped into the Fellowship of the Ring, you know that there's a lot of story behind Mordor. Yoshiyuki Tomino

"Rean is a really compelling, history-rich anime that feels like it has a lot of backstory."

seems intent on becoming an anime J.R.R. Tolkien, and is crafting a beautiful universe in effort to fulfill his dream.

Considering that this is a six-episode series, it's surprising that it continues at its breathtaking pace in volume two. Trying to summarize what is essentially plot points will rob viewers of the energy that the show imparts. As for me, I would rather watch a mind-bogglingly complicated show like *Rean* (which for some reason reminds me of *Now and Then, Here and There*), than sit through *Magical Girls in Short Skirts with Animal Sidekick that Turns Into a Spaceship Volume Three Hundred*.

Even though the animation style of *Wings of Rean* sometimes drifts towards weekday afternoon kids' show, the story is gripping simply because it takes risks. At a time when so many shows are being made because a studio knows that the formula sells, it's really, REALLY refreshing to find myself a little lost. I'd rather watch this show again, than feel like I've already seen a show that I haven't.

Wings of Rean

score 9.0

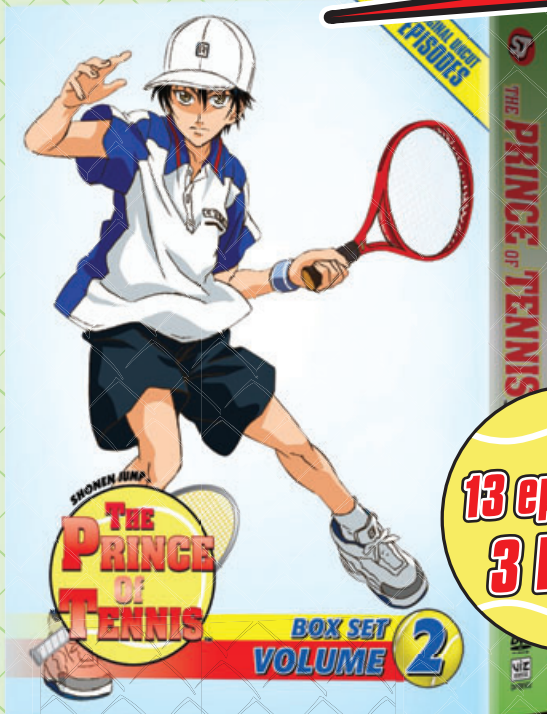
- + Compelling, legitimate, other-worldly feeling.
- Animation can sometimes look a little cheap.

Released By	Bandai Visual USA, Inc.
Volume	1
Running Time	50 Minutes
Episodes	1-4
Rating	13+
Available	June 12 (Vol. 1), July 10 (Vol. 2)

WILL RYOMA KEEP HIS REIGN AS

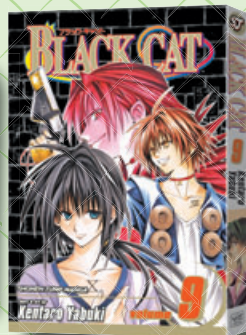


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www.viz.com

Kingdom Hearts II

Disney Squared

words Bill Gray

If you're unfamiliar with Square Enix's Kingdom Hearts series, stop reading this article right now, buy the first and second games (extra credit for playing the GBA version) and then come back. Don't worry—I'll wait the 80 hours it'll take you to get through them. Done? Good, 'cause this manga ain't gonna be much fun for you unless you've played the games.

It's a good thing for TokyoPop, then, that everyone and his brother has played either Kingdom Hearts or its sequel. Reading a manga based on a sequel to a video game based on a mishmash of characters from the Square and Disney pantheons is odd to say the least, but like the games themselves, the manga version of Kingdom Hearts II somehow pulls it off. However, there's little of the synthesis between Square Enix and Disney on display in this first volume.

Instead, KHII (the manga) opens with the story of Roxas, who lives in idyllic Twilight Town. Plagued by dreams that seem like memories, Roxas' blissful existence begins to unravel when strange, wraithlike beings appear throughout town and a mysterious young woman named Naminé hints to Roxas that the

world he's living in may in fact be the dream, and his "memories" the reality.

Shiro Amano's manga adaptation is spot-on, which is to be expected as he also adapted previous KH books. This manga gives fans of the series another wonderful way to enjoy the excellent KH franchise. However, newbies would be better served by playing the games or reading the four-volume Kingdom Hearts manga first.

Read it if... you need more Sora! Sora! Sora!

Kingdom Hearts II	
	score 8.0
Publisher	Tokyopop
Volume	1
Story	Shiro Amano
Art	Shiro Amano
Genre	Adventure
Rating	13+
Available	July 10

Where can I get a pair of those shoes?!



Battle of the Bands

I'm with the band

words Dave Halverson

attle of the Bands may look, feel, and even smell like manga but it's about as far from the tree as the fruit can possibly fall. It's

more a teen comic tucked away in a handy manga package. TokyoPop has become known for such pocket fodder in their crusade to expand the manga market beyond its Otaku roots. Battle takes a great premise—about a hapless loser, Chet, out of a job and his girlfriend, who stumbles into a roadie job for the all-girl metal band Led Salad—and kinda mucks it up with a mixed bag of art. Steve Buccellato's style is loose, almost Archie-like, often lacking in detail. His full-frame work is actually pretty cool, but otherwise the art is mostly overly simplistic, although the shading and staging are exceptional. Still, the Almost Famous-meet-Girls Bravo scenario is fun stuff given that these bands really do do battle, warring against each other with hilarious results. Steve's penchant for vermin

makes for a great aside through the band's mascot "Rikki" and comic relief comes fast, furious, and often times undressed.

Read it if... You like your pocket comics with an American edge.

Battle of the Bands	
	score 7.5
Publisher	Tokyopop
Volume	1
Story	Steve Buccellato
Art	Steve Buccellato
Genre	Comedy/Romance
Rating	16+
Available	July

Sometimes it's good to be a weasel.





Hot Fuzz

Movie: **B+** Extras: **B-**

Directed by: Edgar Wright
Starring: Simon Pegg, Nick Frost
Released By: Rogue Pictures
Rated: R

C urmudgeon London cop Nicholas Angel has just relocated his post to a jovial little village named Sandford. With an absurd arrest record that obliterates every single one of his peers, irking them in the process, Angel's in for a little comedown in this quiet community where crime is nonexistent. His first task on the new job: humorously bring in the underage drinkers at the local pub—which amounts to the whole place—and subsequently bring in the police chief's son on drunk driving charges.

Hot Fuzz delights in skewering the buddy cop movie. The satirical fun begins when Angel is assigned partnership with the drunk driver Danny, who just happens to be on the police force and a wonderfully bumbling idiot. He means well; it's a dream to fire off his clip, screaming toward the sky, just like in *Bad Boys*—one of his

favorite action flicks and one of the many *Hot Fuzz* picks on for its clever charm.

Danny pines for real action; an earnest Angel just wants a safe town. After a string of grotesque “accidents”—a cloaked figure is seen impaling, stabbing and incinerating—the team gets more than they bargained for as *Hot Fuzz* zips to its murderous, action-laced climax. In the process of overplaying its style and violence for comedic effect, the movie actually entertains in unexpected ways; it's better than most the inane action flicks it's sending up.

This is no *Shaun of the Dead* magic—same lead actors, same writer/director—and some of the jokes miss the mark, but *Hot Fuzz* is too smartly funny to rest with just one viewing. **Brady Fiechter**



Shooter

Movie: **B** Extras: **B-**

Directed by: Antoine Fuqua
Starring: Mark Wahlberg, Michael Pena, Danny Glover
Released By: Paramount
Rated: R

Iowered expectations is a good way to get full enjoyment out a well-crafted thriller like *Shooter*. Just don't look too hard at the plot holes, strains in logic and thinly drawn characters.

The movie works thanks to its style and energy, hitting us with a few surprises along the way. I liked the little details surrounding Mark Wahlberg's character's decent into seclusion, and the explanation for what makes a good kill may be complete nonsense but it's fun fodder for a script.

The always-solid Wahlberg—he

belongs in more action movies like this—plays Bob Lee Swagger, a former sniper recruited to stage a presidential assassination. Things go wrong. People get double crossed. The mystery and body count begins to boil as Swagger goes on the run, defending his life while turning into lone-man hero out for justice.

It's the conspiracy that drives *Shooter* that is both a little hard to swallow but equally exciting to follow through its course. Swagger's trained to survive in a war, and it's satisfying war we finally get to witness when the mind shuts down and the bullets begin to fly in the end. **Brady Fiechter**



BACK OF THE BOOK

08_07 GREG ORLANDO
SENIOR EDITOR

The Life For Me...

In the dark, dim days of my youth, I tested video games for a video game publisher on Long Island. You will, no doubt, be able to figure out the company's identity easily enough. It imploded in 2004. Lots of people lost their jobs,

In my defense, I wasn't a tester for very long. Nor was I particularly good at it. It was just a way to kill 10 or so months while I figured out what I wanted to do with my life, which was either shuffle for nickels on the boardwalk or else enter into the lucrative field of slipping and falling in supermarkets, and suing, suing, suing my way to prosperity.

By the time I'd arrived, the company had already built a hard-won reputation for producing shovelware even the shovel was vaguely uncomfortable touching. It seemed odd everyone understood the company's basic malaise (its games were crap), but there was no real collective effort to fix the problem. Everyone seemed complacent. Everyone was complicit in the process, from the CEO who would later loot the offices like a modern-day pirate while telling his employees everything was fine, to me, the lowly tester.

The company had originally been built with an eye toward its employees. When I was hired, testers were given free sodas, candies, and other snacks to keep them awake, by which it is meant more juiced than an 8-year-old after three bowls of Cookie Crisp. Pizza was doled out to all employees on Fridays. It didn't make up for the dismal pay or the soul-sapping work, but it was a thank you no one could ignore. As Rome began to smolder, and then burn, the sodas disappeared. The candies were discontinued. Only the thin, greasy pizza remained. Many suggested this, too, would be excised if not for the fact the pizzeria in question was not sponsored by family men who would not be happy if their massive Friday business dried up. Or so the rumor went.

I arrived at my desk at seven every morning. They handed out games, after much deliberation, at about eight or so. I tested until 10, when I was given 15 minutes to go outside and eat pancakes, or else put my head down on the desk and weep silently. Lunch was at noon, and by two-thirty, we'd be all packed up and ready to go home.

There weren't many good games to be had. Around me, my fellow testers toiled mightily on games that were endearingly nicknamed "Space Ass," "Dragonass," and "S***** and Robin." I worked on a football game, with the rationale being that only someone who thought football was less interesting than, say, a tax seminar would be qualified to test such.

I found many, many things wrong with the football game: Sound bugs, gameplay bugs, crash bugs, text bugs, you name it. I spent two weeks of my life scouring through all the text in the game, text that may, or may not, have been written by some form of lower primate, perhaps a gibbon or macaque. And when it was all said and done, some of the bugs were fixed, and others were simply kept intact. The sad fact of game development is that sometimes, for whatever reason, game developers are either unwilling or unable to fix bugs in their game.

It was my first taste of video game development, even if my involvement was in the most peripheral way imaginable. During that time, I saw many strange and wonderful things: a man spend two months (roughly 280 hours of his life) testing a Game Boy title, a game of the aforementioned Space Ass played by two men who were both sleeping, and William Shatner. I saw him walk into the company offices looking vaguely surprised and more than a little perplexed to be on Long Island.

Now I came to greatly respect my fellow testers, even the one who hadn't bathed in, oh, forever. They gladly took any extra shifts they could in the hopes that someone, anyone, would take notice and move them from a part-time temporary worker to a full-time employee. They were the ones who would take a huge stack of game disks and, dutifully, one after

"It was my first taste of video game development, even if my involvement was in the most peripheral way imaginable."

another, put them into a PlayStation 2 or Saturn to see if they booted up properly.

Soon after my hiring, the company began its first wave of layoffs. I watched some game producers gathering across the street from the testers' offices. They were hugging and saying goodbye. I guess they didn't know it was coming. With the writing on the wall, I began looking for another job—a real one.

Scratch that: I shouldn't have said it. Testing is a real job, and to hell with years of intensive psychotherapy to repress the memory.

I was a game tester.

I won't forget that.

Blah, blah, blah

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